

THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE DEVELOPMENT
OF THE ARTHURIAN LEGEND
(A Study in the Syncretism of Folk Legend
and Literature)

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by
Harold Ross Manly Babcock
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PREFACE

The subject of this thesis is perhaps a bit unusual for a thesis presented as a part of a Bachelor of Divinity program, and yet there are several reasons why I consider the Arthurian legend to be an appropriate subject for such a thesis. The first reason is the fact that hundreds of books, articles, and papers dealing with the "religious" content of various bodies of literature are written every year--mostly by persons lacking any semblance of theological training. The end result is a series of rather strange papers which root out religious implications in works ranging from Anglo-Saxon poetry (where there is some justification in looking for Christian themes and patterns) to the work of Henry Miller (where any such configuration is accidental, to say the least). Such papers are usually more noted for their ingenuity than for the depth of their theological understanding. Therefore I feel that it is quite appropriate for a theological student to join the lists and try to determine the "religious" content of a body of literature to see what sort of understanding is possible when a theological methodology is applied to the subject.

This does not necessarily mean that the treatment of the theme is determined by theological categories or by strictly "theological" procedures. A good part of theological education is concerned with the methods for investigating the nature and development of the Scriptures, and it is this methodology which I hope to apply to the development of the Arthurian legend, together with, I hope, some sort of appreciation for the manner in which theological concepts and structures function.

Another reason why the Arthurian legend seems to be an appropriate field of study for a theological

student is the role the legend played in the culture of Christian Europe. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Arthurian legend played an important role in secular literature--in fact the Matter of Britain forms the largest body of related literature during a time when the civilization of Western Christendom was either approaching or at its highest point of development. And yet there is something about the Arthurian materials which does not seem to fit the general pattern that one would expect in the literature of such a deeply Christian civilization.

If the thesis of this paper is correct, the reason that the Arthurian legend does not seem to fit such a context as closely as might be expected is the fact that the roots of the legend are fixed in a soil which is not exclusively Christian, but on the contrary is actually related to pre-Christian Celtic paganism. Actually such a thesis should not be terribly surprising. The origins of the Arthurian legend appear to rest in folk traditions and literature, and both institutions are noted for the manner in which they conserve elements from previous strata of cultural development, and the syncretistic manner in which they integrate old and new materials of highly divergent natures.

This does not mean that the Arthurian legend was crypto-pagan (although such a case might be presented in relationship to the Welch bards); but rather the theory is offered as an explanation of why the Arthurian legend contains so many elements which are not basically or even nominally Christian, and why the structure of the legend produced some of the themes which play important parts in the Arthurian legend. Of course the Arthurian legend is Christian in the sense that most of the persons involved in the making of it were Christian rather than pagan.

The later parts of the Matter of Britain, such as the Queste del Saint Graal or Mallory's splendid collation of the various legends in Morte d'Artu, are self-consciously Christian, as shall be mentioned, and the later Grail stories are even used to portray teachings about the nature of the Mass. My contention that the Arthurian legend is not basically Christian in origin does not imply that the legend is always non-Christian at every point; but rather that the fundamental structure of the legend is not Christian, and that any specifically Christian treatment is an overlay on the basic stratum of material--an overlay which is frequently so thin that the underlying stratum shows through. Thus a study of the Arthurian legend also indicates something about the nature of popular culture in the Christian civilization of Medieval Europe, and suggests that at even the high point of Christendom, popular culture was subject to more forces than those contained in the Gospels.

This paper is the result of study begun in CH 302, British and Anglo-Saxon Christianity (Fall, 1963-1964); and I wish to record my thanks to the Rev. Dr. Lloyd G. Patterson and the members of that class for suggestions and encouragements which were responsible for the manner in which I have approached this subject, and even for the decision that such a topic was a legitimate area of study within the context of theological education; and to Mr. Larry Bothell for allowing me to go my own way with few, but helpful, restraints. Any failings in this paper are all my own.

H. R. M. B.

THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

Behind the camp by the alders
the land stretched down
into the sea.
A worrying breeze from the North
moved the dragon banners
of Arthur's camp
fitfully.

To the West a Roman road
traversing Logres
ran through Broceliande
to Camelot—
a road no one but the druid-born
traveled after dusk.

Suddenly three figures
became visible in the twilight:
Merlinus Ambrosius—
casting no shadow
and behind him Taliessin—
the druid-born—
a golden harp on his shoulder
and finally Arthur Pendragon—
dux bellorum—
leading his armoured mount.

And all the while
The dragon-headed boats
collected in the river-mouth
as the red and white dragons
prepared to clash.

Harold R. M. Babcock
14 January, 1964
Cambridge,
Massachusetts

Ne tot mencunge, ne tot veir
Ne tot fable, ne tot saveir,
Tant ont li conteor conte,
Et il fableor tant fable,
Por lor contes embeleter,
Que tout ont fait fable sembler.

(Nor all lie, nor all true, nor
all fable, nor all known, so much
have the story-tellers told, and
the fablers fabled, in order to
embellish their tales, that they
have made all seem fable.)

Wace: Roman de Brut

CHAPTER I

Introduction--THE MATTER OF ARTHUR OF BRITAIN

The usual picture of Arthur forms a shadowy part of the vague history of Britain following the withdrawal of the last Roman legion, and sometime prior to the period of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. It is usually prefaced by a romantic picture of the legions turning eastward behind their eagle standards, returning to Rome and the last desperate attempt to keep the Western Empire together in the face of successive waves of barbarians sweeping down upon it from the plains of central Asia and the western plains of Russia, and the developing internal political chaos; while der Gotterdammerung and Celtic dusk fell over Britain, to be followed quickly by the death of civilization in the barbarian hands of the Anglo-Saxons.

Then suddenly out of this murky period, lighted only fitfully by the writings of three monks, the figure of Arthur begins to be known--although only one of the monkish writers mentions him in his history, and that particular monk is given to the fabulous.¹ Slowly the tale spreads; until, suddenly, in the hands of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Britain becomes the imperial realm of Logres, and Arthur of Britain becomes a figure equal to Charlemagne of France. In fact, the Matter of France becomes eclipsed beside the Matter of Britain, and the tales of Arthur undergo change and variation and elaboration at

¹The use of the word "fabulous" in this paper will always refer to its technical rather than its ordinary usage, and will be understood as an indication that the thing to which it applies is characterized as having attributes proper to a fable.

the hands of countless bards throughout most of the Christian West. Each country adds something to the legend: France adds the high history of the Holy Grail, and Germany adds the tales of Tristan and Isolde; and all that is missing is a reason for the advent of the fabulous Arthur and his band of knights.

But such a view simply will not do in light of the evidence which may be assembled to determine the origin and development of the Arthurian cycle. Arthur is something more than the purely mythological figure which a writer like Lord Raglan may propose--he appears to have historical roots which link him to British history as far back as the twilight of Romanitas in the early sixth century.² Nor are the Arthurian romances a genre which can be dealt with as if they arose suddenly in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries without any previous roots. Even C. S. Lewis makes a mistake in not dealing with the earliest stratum of tradition which underlies the *lais* of courtly love; and in placing all his emphasis on the amount of change brought about by the troubadours, he perhaps misses a major factor in the

²Fitzroy R. Somerset, Lord Raglan, The Hero (New York: Vintage Books, 1956).

Lord Raglan holds that Arthur, like Robin Hood and other folk figures, is derived from folk tales exclusively; and he categorically states that such figures never have an historical basis. Lord Raglan does nothing to try to uncover an historical basis for Arthur; he is too content with his treatment of the various mythological themes which came to be associated with the figure of Arthur--thus his rejection is not based upon anything more substantial than a distrust of mythological structure as a whole. His theory, if strictly applied, would mean that neither Davy Crockett nor Daniel Boone, both figures similar to Arthur in a number of respects, were historical figures. Obviously there are some difficulties involved in applying Raglan's thesis.

genesis of courtly love.

Instead the career of Arthur appears to begin in a period of British history which can be reconstructed today: a time when Rome-in-Britain continued to be the rallying point for a final defense of the Britons against the Saxon invaders. Slowly the story began to develop layers of mythological materials, until in the hands of the Welch bards, the legendary elements began to gain the upper hand, and the figure of Arthur necessarily underwent change. The further the stories about Arthur departed from the historical roots, the more heroic a figure Arthur became; until toward the end of the process, the Arthur of the tales had little to do with what the historical figure of Arthur must have been, and Arthur had taken upon himself the mantle of the gods.

The process by which this mythological development occurs is quite complex. Any attempt to trace the development of a single theme must deal with a maze of materials ranging from the chronicles of Gildas, the Venerable Bede, and Nennius; through the early Welch tales recorded in such sources as The Black Book of Carmarthern, The Red Book of Hergest, The White Book of Rhydderch, The Book of Taliesin, Culhwch and Olwen, and The spoils of Annwfn; to the later work of Cretien de Troyes, Robert de Boran, and Wolfram von Eschenbach; and at the same time an attempt must be made to trace the relationship of the material under discussion to such factors as the cultural context of the materials, the relationship to Celtic mythology, and the influence of folk mythology and tales. It is difficult to characterize such a procedure: it is at once literary, historical, and even anthropological. Perhaps the least inadequate characterization of such a method would be to call it phenomenological, since it is the systematic attempt to deal with

the whole range of factors outlined above; and its principle concern is the attempt to uncover what structures were operative in the development of the literary characters and themes which compose the Matter of Britain.

Using this method it is impossible to treat the development of any single theme such as the use of Christian symbols in the legend except in relationship to the other aspects of the Arthurian cycle. Any purely thematic treatment which did not deal with the whole of the materials would be highly superficial, if not completely impossible. Of course the method outlined above has its share of dangers, the most serious being a tendency toward parallelomania--a state of mind in which any parallel between the material under discussion and other sources is thought to causally related. But if the temptation to do so is kept in mind, it is a far less serious failing than the omission of vital relationships which could result from a more superficial, purely thematic approach.

Therefore it will be necessary to attempt some sort of reconstruction of the historical figure of Arthur which lies behind the myth, and to proceed from there to a discussion of the nature of the early Welch materials and their influence upon the figure of Arthur, before beginning a consideration of any single aspect of the Arthurian cycle. At that point, for the sake of convenience, we shall then turn to the places associated with Arthur, the treatment of Arthur by the writers of the lives of the Welch saints, the development of the literary figures which surround Arthur in the later romances, the semi-independent tales connected with the Holy Grail, and the final figure of Arthur in the later romances as the once and future king; attempting at each stage to treat the complex of factors outlined above.

The place to begin a discussion of the historical figure of Arthur is with the general condition of Britain in the period immediately following the withdrawal of the last of the Roman legions. When we consider the historical evidence, the picture that arises is somewhat mixed, but on the whole, Britain is no worse off than other major sections of the Empire. The civitas had been a top-heavy structure in Britain, and the taxing policies of the later Western Empire had taken their toll long before the legions withdrew. But this did not mean the instant breakdown of Romanitas. As Collingwood has shown, the basic pattern remained in the villas and in the lives of the people as late as the time of St. Patrick (St. Patrick's father was a member of a Roman-style town council).³ And as late as 443 (Anglo-Saxon Chronicle) or 446 (Gildas), some sort of civil structure remained which was enough to make an appeal to Rome in the name of Britain.

But this is not to deny that there was confusion in Britain, even if there was some social and cultural continuity. The remaining historical materials, such as the histories of Gildas, Bede and Nennius, indicate that a number of petty kings had arisen following the Roman withdrawal.⁴ The point which needs to be underlined is that the same thing occurred in Gaul and even in Italy itself at about the same time. It is in this period of lingering Romanitas mixed with political instability that the first sign of Arthur is seen.

Even Arthur's name is linked to Romanitas; it is probably derived from the Latin name Artoris--a name

³R. G. Collingwood, Roman Britain (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), p. 305.

⁴Ibid., p. 314.

which is known to have been held by a centurian in the Sixth Legion in Britain, and altared by the usual patterns of transference into Welch.⁵ Even more important is the title given to Arthur by Nennius: dux bellorum, the chief of a mobile body of mounted shock-troops. This title combines the title of the dux of Britain (the highest Roman political authority) with the office of the Count of the Saxon Shore (the head of a troop of armored cavalry held in ready for swift deployment against Viking raiders anywhere in the southeast part of the country).⁶ Thus Arthur's title is believable even if "bellorum" is not very good Latin; and from the description of Arthur's battles given by Nennius, Arthur functions very much in the same manner as the Count of the Saxon Shore.

There is just one flaw in an otherwise perfect picture; although Nennius mentions Arthur in his history

⁵The alternative derivation of the name "Arthur" is from the Welch "arth," meaning bear. As this theory is usually stated, Arthur is called a great bear, and is sometimes surnamed "the terrible" in some early sources. The alternative derivation may be the cause of Arthur's being described as one of the three despoilers of Britain in one of the Welch triads, although it may also be a reference to the removal of the magical protecting head of Bran from London (Arthur felt it was not fitting for heroic men to live by such protection). The case for a Welch derivation is weakened by the logical way the Roman name "Artoris," known to exist in Britain, would yield "Arthur" when transcribed into Welch. It makes more sense to assume that some of Arthur's early attributes arise from a confusion of Arthur with "arth" than to assume that "arth" is the source of "Arthur."

⁶Gilbert Sheldon, The Transition from Roman Britain to Christian England (London: Macmillan, 1932), pp. 36 ff.

It is interesting to note how the career of Arthur projected in this paper parallels that of the historical figure of Cunedda, dux Britanniarum, who apparently lived in the period just prior to Arthur.

of Britain, neither Gildas nor Bede does. Furthermore, Nennius did not write his history until the sixth century, while Gildas wrote De Exicidio et Conquestu somewhere around 548, thus making him roughly contemporaneous with the events he describes. Gildas does record the battle of Badon Hill, which Nennius refers to as Arthur's great battle, and in a way that tallies with the account in Nennius--but he leaves Arthur out. One suggestion is that Arthur was so well known that he did not need to be mentioned, and that to do so would have been as redundant as saying Wellington at Waterloo. Perhaps a better reason was given by Margaret Deansley, who points out that Gildas hardly ever mentions names.⁷ At any rate, we do have a situation presented in the early histories in which a figure like Arthur might very well have arisen. Britain in the middle of a struggle against invading Saxons still retained something of Romanitas in the battle against them. Thus the figure of Arthur, dux bel-lorum, with a band of armored cavalry, is a possible figure, even if he cannot be definitely established.⁸ Certainly the figure of Arthur in the early histories is far removed from the figure of the later tales. According to Nennius, he is not even a king, but something more and less at the same time: the last representative of Romanitas and the Age of Empire.

The next strata of references to Arthur are of a fragmentary nature, but they tend to agree with the picture of Arthur outlined above. The Annales Cambriac,

⁷Margaret Deanesly, The Pre-Conquest Church in England (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 7.

⁸Geoffrey Ashe, From Caesar to Arthur (London: Collins, 1960), pp. 14, 59, and 60; and Collingwood, Roman Britain, pp. 323, 324.

which is dated in the seventh century, on the basis of its linguistic usage, follows the general outline of Nennius but adds an account of Arthur's death in a battle against one of his own men, Mordred. Arthur is also mentioned in the Welch chronicle Gododdin, which dates somewhere in the seventh century. This work describes the deeds of a warrior king who fought against the barbarians, and then concludes with the words "...but he was no Arthur." The other reference which should be mentioned is dated about 570, and says that King Aedan MacGabrain, a northern Celt, named one of his sons Arthur, because he was "to drive out the Saxons."⁹ All of these references definitely identify Arthur with the battle of Badon Hill, and picture him as a figure who might well have flourished in the twilight of Romanitas.

The next body of literature in which Arthur plays a part is very different in tone from the materials discussed up to this point. It moves in a completely different world--a world filled with myth and magic; an almost homeric world, in fact, in which heroes are larger than life, and primary concerns have to do with war and the chase. This group is composed of The Black Book of Carmarthen, The Red Book of Hergest, The White Book of Rhydderch, Culhwch and Olwen, The Spoils of Annwfn, and The Book of Taliesin. Of these, the references to Arthur are smallest in number in The Black Book of Carmarthen, although one of the passages does characterize Arthur as "wonderful in songs," which is useful in establishing the range of the Arthurian stories during this period in

⁹Kenneth Jackson, "On the Northern British Section in Nennius," and Nora K. Chadwick, "The Celtic Background of Anglo-Saxon England," Celt and Saxon (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), ed. Nora K. Chadwick, pp. 28 and 324.

the tenth and eleventh centuries.¹⁰

Culhwch and Olwen and The Spoils of Annwfn provide the basic pattern for the Welch stories about Arthur. In these tales Arthur is an heroic figure, but neither the heroic figure of the earlier period just discussed, nor the figure of the later romances. Instead he is presented as a somewhat rough and ready figure, in charge of a group of men whom he leads either on hunts,¹¹ or on raids and battles of some sort or another--sometimes raids on the Western Island, which will be discussed in Chapter Five, or in the case of Culhwch and Olwen, raids similar to the exploits of the Irish folk hero CuCuhlinn (as, for example, when he rescues a pretty maid from an ugly father). The Red Book of Hergest, The White Book of Rhydderch, and The Book of Taliesin fall into the same

¹⁰There is considerable difference of opinion as to the proper dating of the Welch materials, and the question is one of some importance to the central thesis of this paper. In manuscript form, the works can be dated somewhere between the tenth and eleventh centuries; and there would be some question as to whether or not they were influenced by the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae, as has been proposed by J.S.P. Tatlock, in The Legendary History of Britain. The arguments against such an influence are impressive. First there is the philological evidence which suggests an earlier date of composition than the age of the existing MSS on the basis of vocabulary and grammatical usage--especially helpful in a period when linguistic change was so rapid (see Deanesly, The Pre-Conquest Church in England, pp. 22, 23). Next there is the exhaustive study of the issue by Roger Sherman Loomis, in Wales and Arthur (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1956), which traces references to Arthur and typical Arturian themes prior to Geoffrey of Monmouth's history--even using Geoffrey's other works for proof of his thesis--which establish the prior claims of the Welch sources. Finally the relationships between Arthurian themes and Celtic mythology discussed in this paper also argue against Tatlock's theory.

¹¹See Chapter Three, pp. 33-36.

category, with the White and Red Books actually consisting of a cycle of Arthurian tales in the same vein as Jason and the Golden Fleece. Thus it seems to be fair to say that the figure of Arthur is modified in the Welch material by the introduction of mythological elements at the hands of the Welch bards.

If the origins of the historical figure of Arthur fall in the misty past of another Britain and another world--that brief time following the Roman withdrawal, when Romanitas fought to remain in Britain; it is not exaggerating to say that the subject which we now turn to consider is even more shadowy and mysterious: the age of the Welch bards, the time in which the story of Arthur is taken up and shaped by the world of myth. The bards of Wales really belong to two worlds, the one historical, the age of the emergence of Wales out of the wreckage of Romanitas, and the eventual Norman invasion; the other trans-historical, the world of archetypes that seem to be as old as the mind of man, and are worked out in folk-lore and various religious myths which transcend time and space. In fact, they belong to two worlds in still another sense as well. The bards lived in a context that was at least nominally Christian--that had been so to a large extent for about five hundred years--and yet the images and myths that are the stock-and-trade of their art were part of a much older age. On the surface some of the bards seem to sing of the new God, but the heart of their songs is still unchanged, and comes from the old tales of the Celtic gods; and through them, all of the ancient myths become alive.

Throughout the work of the bards which remains from this period, what Robert Graves has so aptly called the "lapwing" is at work. Although Graves is not always the most careful of scholars, there is no doubt that in

his strange poetic way he has created--in his image of the bird which feigns a broken wing to draw attention to herself and away from the nesting place of her young--an excellent figure to explain what the Welch bards were doing in their poems.¹² In fact, when the lapwing is known for what it really is, there is good evidence to support the claim that much of the bardic material is not only based upon pagan mythology, but that some of the material is actually cryptically anti-Christian, since under the surface it connects the secret wisdom of the bards with the pagan world-view and symbolism.

The remaining fragments of the work of the Welch bards goes a long way in establishing the type of context into which the Arthurian stories were developed. On the surface they seem to be a part of a Christian world-view, but that is only due to the work of the lapwing. It is true that they contain references to Christian events and symbols; in fact, the crypto-pagan element in the Welch bardic poetry is remarkably similar to the process that went on in Anglo-Saxon magical spells, following their "Christianization."¹³ The new Christian symbols are very much in evidence, but the underlying framework retains the old pagan world-view, and the Christian symbols are really only a secondary overlay for public consumption.

This same process occurs in folk literature

¹²Robert Graves, The White Goddess (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), pp. 40, 41.

¹³Godfrid Storms, Anglo-Saxon Magic (S'-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1948).

Chapter I, pp. 1-11 are especially helpful in describing the process under discussion, although the examples given in the later chapters from the original sources are needed to prove the author's thesis.

quite often during the period under discussion. An excellent example is the curious story known as An Croch-
aire Tarrnochtuighthe, which is commonly told even to
this day.¹⁴ The basic plot of the story is that of a do-
gooder who manages to lose his clothing and get hung from
a tree limb in a particularly humiliating manner. Upon a
close look at the tale, it comes as no surprise to find
out that An Crochaire Tarrnochtuighthe was used by Irish
pagans at one time to show their contempt for the Cruci-
fix of the new religion. In the case of this story, the
barb is well hidden, and the derisive term (even the fig-
ure itself) is used by Christians without their even be-
ing aware of the blasphemy involved.

This is not to deny that the Welch bards knew
Christian symbolism; they certainly did. In fact, in
addition to the more common bits of esoteric Christianity,
they may also have known a number of late apocryphal apoc-
alypses, and even some esoteric Jewish teaching as well
(for example, the Kabala).. No one except Robert Graves,
in his strange fashion, has attempted to trace such in-
fluences, although it seems quite likely that such an
influence does exist.¹⁵ But again this is not to say that
the underlying mythology is Judeo-Christian. The Book of
Taliesin contains many poems that are a strange blend of
biblical, apocalyptical, classical, and Welch pagan mate-
rials. The Hanes Taliesin is perhaps the best example of
the sort of thing which was produced by the late Welch
bards. It appears to be Christian on the surface: its
superficial imagery certainly is Christian in its emphasis;

¹⁴Roger Sherman Loomis, Celtic Myth and Arthur-
ian Romance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927),
pp. 18-21.

¹⁵Graves, The White Goddess, pp. 143-167.

but it actually is not basically Christian in concept or emphasis. It is impossible in the space allotted to this chapter to deal with all of the details of this strange blend of mythologies, but Gwynn Jones has treated it in some detail.¹⁶ Instead it should be sufficient to point out that many of the bardic riddles, and the curious battles of the trees, come from this context. A good illustration of the basic blending of materials is the following riddle taken from Cad Goddeu:

It is long since I was a herdsman.
I travelled over the earth
Before I became a learned person.
I have travelled, I have made a circuit,
I have slept in a hundred islands,
I have dwelt in a hundred cities.
Learned Druids,
Prophecy ye of Arthur?
Or is it me they celebrate? (17)

The answer to the riddle must remain a question still, but the figure identified by the riddle seems to have more in common with the ancient deities than it does with the Gospel.

The Church and the Crown were bothered by the bards' songs, and both took steps to repress them. During the period of independence prior to the Norman conquest of Wales, the master-poets were required by law to take an oath to avoid what the Church called "untruth," which could only refer to the pagan mythological elements in their poetic imagery.¹⁸ After the fall of Wales to

¹⁶Gwyn Jones, Welsh Legends and Folk Tales (Oxford: University Press, 1955).

¹⁷Graves, The White Goddess, p. 141.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 4-10.

Henry IV, measures were directed against those following the bardic craft. Apparently Welch mythology still had the power to stir the Welch, and the heroic tales exerted some sort of force in the resistance to Norman rule. The poets' answer to both measures was to follow the ruse of the lapwing. Thus during the most crucial period in the development of the Arthurian legend, the story of Arthur was in the hands of a people with knowledge of the old mythology, poets who did not hesitate to use their knowledge in their poetry. One of the things we shall try to determine in the following chapters is the extent to which the poets used this knowledge of the old mythology.

CHAPTER II

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE ARTHURIAN LEGEND

Geography is one of the most difficult problems which must be faced in dealing with the legends which form the Arthurian Cycle. There is hardly a major district in Wales, Southern England or even the South of Scotland which does not claim at least some connexion with one of the legends. To complicate things even more, there are a few places outside England which make the same sort of claim; thus Ireland claims Arthur's castle, and Provence claims to be the birthplace of Lancelot, one of the greatest heroes of the cycle. It soon becomes apparent that the problem under discussion involves more than history or geography alone. It is really a mythological problem, as most issues connected with the Arthurian cycle are.

The first major problem is to fix, more or less, the region in Britain in which the historical figure of Arthur is likely to have lived and fought. The principle places that have been put forward include Cornwall, Wales, and the Scots Border country. As we have reconstructed the historical basis for the Arthurian legends, each claimant makes a certain amount of sense. After the legion withdrew from Britain, the southern Coast along the Channel became the Saxon shore in fact as well as name; and the invading Norsemen gained a number of fairly permanent toe-holds along the Southern Coast.¹ Therefore

¹For an analysis of the archeological evidence and its relationship to the picture of the Saxon settlement in fifth century Britain as presented in the Ven. Bede's History of the English Church, see F. M. Stenton,

it seems sensible to assume that a number of battles might have been fought against the invaders in the region around Cornwall in an attempt to contain them to the fens and low-lying downlands. On the other hand, the native Britons withdrew from the advancing Norsemen across a low range of hills into the relative safety of Wales;² and it makes a fair amount of sense to assume that Wales might have been the scene of Arthur's last stand against the Norsemen. Finally there is the matter of the foederati which was composed of Saxon troops. The early histories mention a number of difficulties with the Saxon foederati after the withdrawal of the last legions, and there is a fair amount of archeological evidence to suggest that there was a serious military undertaking around the region of the Roman Wall during the period in which Arthur must have been active.³ This means that Scotland remains a real possibility.

It would be helpful if the chronicles provided some clue as to where Arthur fought his battles, but unfortunately they do not. They list the names of places all right, but in Latin forms that are just about impossible to trace to contemporary sites. Of course this has not prevented a number of persons from reconstructing a list of battles and their modern counterparts.⁴ But

¹ (continued)
Anglo-Saxon England (Oxford: University Press, 1943), pp. 1-19; and J.N.L. Myres, The English Settlements (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1936), pp. 352-381.

²R. G. Collingwood, Roman Britain (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1936), pp. 318-325.

³Ibid., p. 236.

⁴For a sample of the lists proposed, see Arthur W. Wade-Evans, Welsh Christian Origins (Oxford: The Alden Press, 1934), pp. 103-105.

each list has about the same number of merits and failings, so that the enterprise is almost completely useless. Probably the only positive identification that has been made is to locate the Mont Baden (mentioned in Nennius) in Wales at the contemporary hill of the same name. Therefore we must turn elsewhere in our attempt to decide the geography of the historical aspects of the Arthurian stories.

At this point, the chronicles are helpful. Gildas, Nennius, and even Bede, agree that the battles against the Norsemen all took place either in association with a river or a mountain. Therefore the mountain sites and river locations of Arthur's battles fit this basic pattern. In addition, this makes a great deal of historical sense, since it tallies with what we know about the Norse thrust into Britain during the fifth and sixth centuries. The Norse invaders attacked in forces that were brought to Britain in fairly small boats, and since the battles were composed of fairly large fighting groups on both sides it is quite logical to assume that the small groups probably massed somewhere in the fen country at the mouth of rivers before going into battle.⁵ Thus the association with either mountains or a river-mouth mentioned in the chronicles, would seem to make a great deal of sense both historically and militarily. And this argument tends to support the claims of the Cornwall region to be the area in which Arthur fought most of his battles.

The claim that Wales has for the historical

⁵Class discussion, the Reverend Llyod G. Patterson, Episcopal Theological School, Cambridge, in CH 302, British and Anglo-Saxon Christianity, Fall 1963-64.

setting of the Arthurian traditions is perhaps a little less convincing in spite of Mount Baden, as was already mentioned. Wales was the stronghold into which the native Britons fled. It is just possible that Mount Baden, which is near the border, represents a high-water mark of an attempted Saxon invasion; but that must remain pure conjecture. However Wales has a different type of claim to the Arthurian legends: after the fall of the rest of Britain to the Saxons, Wales the last stronghold of Rome-in-Britain. The coins and other artifacts that have been excavated in Wales indicate that the Romanized society lasted longer in Wales than anywhere else.⁶ Even more important than the technological continuity is the attitude of the people as to who and what they thought they were. Thus a petty Welch chieftain from the late sixth or early seventh century still turned to Rome when he wished an inscription for his grave stone, and styled himself "Protectoris;" not very good Latin perhaps, but still an identification with Romanitas.⁷ And thus Wales becomes the logical place to expect the story about Arthur to have survived.

As we have already seen, this is exactly what happened; Arthur became one of the folk heroes of the Welch, and as a result, a number of places in Wales came to be associated with Arthur and the figures around him. Cairn Cabal, mentioned in Nennius, is located in Wales and is associated with Arthur's hound which appears in the later Welch tales. Taliessin's chair is the name

⁶Collingwood, Roman Britain, p. 295.

⁷Ibid., p. 316.

given to several natural rock formations in Wales, the "chair being a balanced or hanging rock."⁸ The Wood of Broceliande in Wales became the wood in which Niniane enchanted Merlin into his long sleep.⁹ A number of places such as the River Usk became associated with Arthur through the stories of Arthur's hunts and the lives of the Welch saints.¹⁰ And finally a number of caves or mountians became known as the places where Arthur and his men were enchanted, awaiting the time when their return was needed.

A careful look at the places involved produces a record of rather mixed identifications. Some of the places, such as Cairn Cabal, may rest upon mistaken etymologies of place names. Cabal seems to be an old Welch word meaning hound or dog, and the place name probably provided the link to the story of Arthur's hound, which was important in the early Welch stories. A similar mistake was responsible for a story about the Irish hero Cuchulain, where a false etymology of his name turned him into Culcu's hound and provided the basis for a story explaining how he got his name.¹¹ In other cases the answer seems to rest purely upon the tendency for folk legends to identify places in the stories with prominent places and natural formations in the region in which the story is told. In this sense folk stories

⁸Also see Chapter Four, p. 44.

⁹Ibid., p. 40.

¹¹Wade-Evans, Welch Christian Origins, p. 108.

¹²See Alwyn and Brinley Rees, Celtic Heritage (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 247, for the folk explanation of Cuchlain's name, and p. 248 for the probable explanation of the name.

almost always are concrete.

Although Wales has the prior right to claim places associated with Arthur; it was not the only place to do so by any means. As the stories became dispersed from Wales, a number of unusual geological formations and a number of ancient ruins became associated with Arthur from Ireland to the Continent. Thus a ruin in Ireland that had once been associated with Cuchulain, Tara, was transferred to Arthur and became Arthur's castle.¹² Or in England, Carelton, which has the ruins of a Roman fortification, became the location of Arthur's court, and the ruins became the ruins of Camelot.¹³ In a similar manner some places along the Roman Wall came to be associated with Arthur as well.

Some of the most interesting of the places which became associated with Arthur are the sites of the ancient earth works. These sites, most of them found in the Midlands of England, vary widely in nature. Some of them are the remains of Roman fortifications. Popular legend associates Arthur with the Roman earthworks around Cadbury Castle in Somerset. According to local legend Arthur and his men lived on under the hill near the earthwork.¹⁴ Such beliefs seem to arise out of the necessity to explain the unknown as has been mentioned, and this seems to be especially common concerning the Roman ruins which are fairly impressive to this day; and

¹² For a treatment of Tara before it was ceded to Arthur, see Celtic Heritage, pp. 118 ff.

¹³ Roger Sherman Loomis, "The Legend of Arthur's Survival, in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages," ed. Loomis, p. 68.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 69.

must have been quite impressive to a primitive countryman living in a simple thatched cottage. Such legends have remarkably tenacious qualities. J. Armitage Robinson records an incident which occurred in the late nineteenth century in which a group of archeologists were asked by an old man if they had come to get the king.¹⁵ The other major structures associated with Arthur are the ancient barrows on the highland plain around Salisbury which are ancient passage tombs built in the late stone age. Here elements of the Arthurian story are mixed with tales of a somewhat more sinister nature, and the burrows are magical places to be avoided at night.¹⁶ Here again Arthur sometimes is manifest as the Wild Huntsman.

Nor was the process limited to England and Scotland. As the Arthurian legend spread across Europe, so did legends connecting Arthur and figures around Arthur with places in Europe; and by 1211, Arthur and his men were thought to be living and feasting in a cavern under Mount Etna.¹⁷ Secondary figures such as Lancelot came to be associated with places in Provence quite appropriately, for Lancelot du Lac was probably a creation of the French poets.¹⁸ But above all of these other places, including

¹⁵J. Armitage Robinson, Two Glastonbury Legends (Cambridge: University Press, 1926), p. 53.

¹⁶For a treatment of the barrows, and their origins, see Sean P. Riordain and Glyn Daniel, New Grange (London: Thames and Hudson, 1960). It is just possible that the religion of the barrow-builders had something to do with the superstition surrounding the barrows. The incident mentioned by Robinson concerning Arthur's return indicates that folk memory is remarkably long-lived; and the mother-goddess cult of the barrow-builders was probably rather sinister.

¹⁷Loomis, "The Legend of Arthur's Survival" pp. 68-69.

¹⁸See Chapter Four, p. 56.

the places in Wales, Arthur came to be associated with the Tor and Isaldn of Glastonbury.

Just exactly how this came about is difficult to determine. Arthur was really the property of the Welch, and it is due to their development of the stories in combination with their own folk mythology that we have the figure of Arthur who is the subject of the later romances. And yet Glastonbury has a greater claim for Arthur than any area outside of Wales should have. One of the major reasons is Geoffrey of Monmouth's history of Britain that identifies Glastonbury as the place to which Arthur was taken after he received his mortal wound; and yet Geoffrey appears to have been using an already existing connexion, the origins of which are now lost. For Geoffrey, Glastonbury was the island of Avalon--actually the Island in the Western Sea, which will be discussed in Chapter Four--the ancient Celt paradise.

Geoffrey explained the connexion between Avalon and the island at Glastonbury on the basis of what is now known to be a faulty etymology of the word "aval" meaning apple.¹⁹ Thus for him the island was the island of apples which occurred in so many of the early Welch legends. And yet such a derivation is ingenious. According to Roger Sherman Loomis, the island, always referred to in the Welch texts as 'ynys avallach,' actually meant the Island of Avalloc--another name for the god of the underworld.²⁰ It is interesting to note in passing that the name "Avalon" was not given to the island in the Western

¹⁹ Edmund Chambers, Arthur of Britain (London: David Nutt, 1927), pp. 255 ff.

²⁰ Loomis, "The Legend of Arthur's Survival," p. 66.

Sea until the legend had been passed to the Bretons, who apparently derived the name "Avalon" from the similarity between a place-name in Burgundy, "Avallon", and the Welch name "Avalloc", - thus missing the real meaning of the name in the Welch sources.

And yet even this false etymology does not explain why Glastonbury was associated with the island of Apples; and the answer seems to rest in yet another false etymology: the association between Glastonbury and the island of glass (Caer Wydyr), the abode of the Welch deity Melwis--a figure who appears in the Life Of Saint Gildas which was written at Glastonbury, and who was said to have kidnapped Guinevere and taken her to Glastonbury.²¹ As we shall see in Chapter Four, Melwis was one form of the god of the Celtic other-world; and the incident is probably based on the etymology outlined above.

Thus Glastonbury came to be associated with the island to which Morgan le Fay took Arthur after he received his mortal wound. There is at least a mythological rightness about this association, even if the exact reasons outlined above are faulty. Morgan was a water nymph, and Glastonbury and its associations with the Celtic other-world was the logical place for her to appear.²² Actually Glastonbury was a good choice for locating the central emphasis of the myth of Arthur's return. Glastonbury was an unusual place generally speaking. In addition to its associations with Arthur, Glastonbury also claimed the earliest Church in England--and neither Bede nor Gildas contradicted the claim. In addition

²¹ See Chapter Four, p. 49.

²² Ibid., p. 54.

Glastonbury was tied up with the legends surrounding Joseph of Aramethia, and claimed to have cruets containing the blood of Christ--apparently in answer to the Grail legends. Glastonbury also claimed the wonderful Thorn tree that blossomed at Christmas-tide. And finally Glastonbury stands under the shadow of the Glastonbury Tor which apparently was an important site in the religion of the Celts when they were still pagans.

Actually Glastonbury Tor deserves separate treatment, since it, rather than the island, is the site assigned to Arthur in some folk legends. The legend of Arthur's return is often associated with mountains, and Arthur and his men are thought to be in a cave somewhere inside the mountain, as in the case of Glastonbury Tor. It is difficult to establish exactly what importance the Tor once held, but there are indications that it must have been linked to the old religion in some way. There are ruins of several chapels on the Tor at the present time, and we are told that they were all chapels to St. Michael, the Archangel, who is the protector of the faithful against the powers of darkness.²⁵ Thus there is some reason for suspecting that the connexion between Glastonbury Tor and Arthur's return is more than an accident. It would seem that the Tor needed to be controlled by St. Michael, and that it, rather than the island, was the place originally associated with the king of the other-world. Celtic mythology did have an underworld as well as an island paradise for heroes; and King Melwis seems to be, because of his association with Guinevere, more the King of the underworld than the king of the Island in the Western Sea (which was rightly associated

²⁵Robinson, Two Glastonbury Legends, pp. 45 ff.

with Bran in Celtic mythology. Thus the stories at Glastonbury may very well represent some sort of confusion between the two legends and a fusing of two mythically different other-worlds.

There are of course a number of places which have not been treated in this discussion. To do so would serve very little point, since the basic pattern outlined in this chapter holds true for the other examples as well. The geography of the Arthurian Legend is a complex and diverse geography indeed; covering not only most of Wales and England, but spanning most of Western Europe as well. In fact, the geography of the Arthurian legend spans the gaps between the world of ordinary people and places, and the shadow world of mythology; and it is as diverse as are the legends which cause places to be associated with Arthur of Britain.

CHAPTER III

ARTHUR AMONG THE SAINTS

One of the traditional sources for the development of the Arthurian myth has been the lives of the early British saints, especially the lives of the Welch saints. Recent scholarship in the area has shown that most of these lives are of a rather late date, although many of them are still prior to Geoffrey of Monmouth. Actually, Arthur does not play a very important part in any of the saints' lives; and he plays no part at all in the lives of any of the earlier Welch saints such as Samson, Paulus, Broicus, or Aurelianus, where he might reasonably be expected to make some sort of an appearance, since they all belong to the late Romano-British period. On the other hand Arthur is included in a fairly large number of the later saint's lives, especially those of David of Wales, Columbia, Cadog, Kentigren, Carannog, Paternus, Padarn, and even Gildas.

In the lives of the saints in which Arthur does appear, he plays a rather unusual role, and the world in which he moves is itself an unusual world. A pious writer trying to be honest in his historical criticism of the early saints' lives, and still faithful to what he believed to be the mind of the Church wrote that the lives of the saints did not belong to the usual order of things, and that the truth for which the writers of the lives were aiming was not a literal truth, but rather a poetic one.¹ Exactly. The lives

¹The statement above is a summary of the central argument of a section on the "ethical truth" of hagiography, pp. 74-79, in Chapter Four of Charles W. Jones, Saints' Lives and Chronicles in Early England (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1947). In spite of the context in which it is quoted the work is a serious work which does a good job of dealing with its subject.

of the early saints are every bit as fabulous as any of the mythological materials we shall discuss in our treatment of the development of the Arthurian cycle.

Thus it is not surprising to be reading an early saint's life and suddenly find that the saint at prayer is attacked in turn by a lion, a roaring bull, a menacing bear, a snake, a grunting boar, a bleating snake, and so on.² Apparently such events were everyday occurrences. Nor is it unusual when dealing with Celtic saints to find that St. David and St. Cynog were born as the result of rape, or that St. Beuno was born without the usual steps by his parents, or that St. Cadoc's mother was abducted, or that St. Finan's father was a red-gold salmon, or even that St. Cennydd, St. Cuimine, and St. Clothra were born as the results of incest.³ This is not to attack the lives of the saints, but merely to stress how much they were influenced by secular and pagan mythology. All of the saints' lives were as filled with stories derived from Celtic mythology as were the early stories in the Welch treatment of Arthur.

In some respects, the saints' lives were even more fabulous than the Arthurian materials since they piled Christian mythology and miracle on top of the pagan Celtic base that is found in the early stories of Arthur. Yet, this is not to dispute the statement quoted in the preceding paragraph: the saints' lives are written to stress a truth that is more than literal;

²This list is taken from a passage of the Life of St. Guthlac, Section XXXVI, translated in Jones. p. 143.

³Alwyn and Brinley Rees, Celtic Heritage (New York: Grove Press, 1961), pp. 224-225.

and it is not surprising that they employed the literary coin of the day to do so. But the preceding examination of the nature of the saints' lives should be a warning not to expect in them anything about Arthur that is safer or more historical than any of the other stories.

The figure of Arthur that is gleaned from his appearances in the lives of the early saints is of a piece with the earliest strata of Welch stories dealing with Arthur, as might be expected. But in one sense that is just the problem--the saints' lives are later than the original form of such works as Culhwch and Owein in most cases, and it might be expected that Arthur would have undergone some change. And yet it is still a rough and ready Arthur who figures in the early lives; a figure that is little more than that of a petty Welch chieftian. There is no hint that Arthur is any more important than a number of other similar figures with whom the saint has to deal; and we are given the impression that the whole lot of them, Arthur and all, are not good for very much more than drinking, fighting, and stealing cattle. Typical of this sort of treatment of Arthur's character occurs in the life of St. Padarn of Aberystwyth. In this story Arthur happened to be walking past the monastery in which the saint was sitting after his return from Jerusalem with an unusually fine tunic. Arthur saw the tunic and wanted it. St. Padarn refused to give it to Arthur who went away in fury, only to return like a great lout raging so much that he levelled the ground in front of him as he went. The saint responded by asking the ground to level him, which it did right up to Arthur's chin. Minus point for Arthur--the game goes to the saint.

And yet there is something false about this treatment of Arthur: he is too much a stock villain.⁴

Only slightly less hostile is a story from the life of St. Cadog. According to this story the saint was harboring some men whom Arthur wanted for perfectly logical and rightful reasons. When he heard that the men were with St. Cadog, he arrived to demand the men, thus breaking the law of sanctuary. The saint responded by calling in saints David and Teilo to join him, and after debate the clerics agreed to pay for the slain men with cattle. Arthur insisted upon red and white cows. The cows were taken to the River Usk, to be delivered to Arthur and his men on the other side. Arthur sent his men to lead the cows across the ford, and they no sooner did so than they were turned into bales of fern. The story ends with Arthur reconciled to St. Cadog, and agreeing to enforce the saint's right to grant sanctuary. Here at least Arthur is not a devil, although the saint does get the better of him.⁵

In another story from the same life Arthur is given a slightly better treatment by the author. This incident is interesting since it gives the names of two of Arthur's men as Cai and Bedwyr, both names which are closely associated with Arthur in the primary strata of Welch tradition. According to this story Arthur is

⁴Arthur W. Wade-Evans, Welch Christian Origins, (Oxford: The Alden Press, 1934), p. 109.

⁵For more information see Kathleen Hughes, "British Museum MS. Cotton Vespasian A. XIV (Vita Sanctorum Wallensium) in Studies in the Early British Church, ed. Nora K. Chadwick (Cambridge: University Press, 1958), pp. 188-198.

playing dice with Kai and Bedwyr when he is interrupted by a fight between two kings: one Brycheiniog the father of Gwladus, the other Gwynllyw, who is in the act of carrying Gwladus off. Arthur intercedes as a peacemaker and settles the dispute. One of the other interesting details here, in addition to the link with Cai and Bedwyr, is that fact that Arthur is treated by the two kings as equals of theirs.⁶

Thus a pattern begins to emerge out of the incidents involving Arthur in the early saints' lives. First of all the role that Arthur plays is believable although colored by the same mythology that pervades all the lives of the saints. He is presented as being a long way from what the historical figure of Arthur must have been; but he is still of a believable stature, and there is no more reason to be suspicious about Arthur as he is pictured in the saints' lives than there is about any of the other figures discussed in them.

The second thing that emerges is the fact that Arthur is used for polemical purposes by the monkish writer of the vitas: Arthur is a symbol of a worldly power who is subdued by the saint and turned into a faithful protector of the Church. Thus he is often presented as greedy for taxes, or as a representative of worldly law as opposed to divine law (the cow incident in St. Cadog where Arthur was obviously in the right from an earthly point of view), or even as being ignorant of sacred things (as in an incident between Arthur and St. Carannog, in which Arthur doesn't even know how to treat an altar stone);⁷ and the saint's

⁶Wade-Evans, Welsh Christian Origins, p. 107.

⁷Ibid., p. 110. For the reason behind the incident, see Nora K. Chadwick, "Intellectual Life in West Wales in the Last days of the Celtic Church," in Studies in the Early British Church, pp. 157-158. The incident is actually used to explain how St. Carannog came to possess land which once belonged to St. Padarn.

victory over Arthur--usually getting the better of him in some miraculous way--represents the victory of the Church over the world.

And yet Arthur represents something more than a symbol of the world in the saintly lives. To some extent he is used by the writers of the vitas for a bit of saintly status-seeking. Thus in the incident of Cadog's cows, Arthur is represented as the "most illustrious king of Britannia".⁸ Apparently his usefulness as a symbol of earthly power was increased by making him as important as possible: the victory of the saint then became all the more impressive. There are even cases where the status-seeking is more obvious than in the type of situation mentioned. When the life of St. Illtud claims Arthur as a cousin of the saint, it does not seem to be doing so in an attempt to increase the prestige of Arthur.⁹

The major exception to this general treatment is found in the life of St. Gildas. According to the writer of the life (a monk from Glastonbury Abbey), Arthur is not the usual combination of things that he is in the other saints' lives. Instead he is a much more noble figure, closer in character to the figure of the later romances. The principle incident in St. Gildas' relationship with Arthur involved the killing of Huel, a brother of Gildas, and the resulting relationship between Arthur and the saint. In spite of the severity of the thing that Arthur had done, he is not

⁸Wade-Evans, p. 107.

⁹Ibid., p. 101.

treated roughly in the Life of Gildas. Instead all of the facts are given, and Arthur is excused to a degree. What is more important, Arthur is pictured as penitent over the death of Huel in spite of the circumstances surrounding his death; and the writer of the life records the fact that Arthur is forgiven by Gildas because of his penitence.¹⁰ This treatment may in part be due to the fact that the Life of Gildas was written quite late--it is just barely pre-Geoffrian--and that the stature of Arthur may have already grown to such dimensions as to prohibit the sort of treatment given to him in the earlier saints' lives when pious purpose led to a less favorable treatment of Arthur.¹¹

Taken together, the appearances of Arthur in so many of the saint's lives indicates the fact that Arthurian stories must have existed in Wales and Midland-England in the public domain for quite a while prior to Geoffrey of Monmouth, since Arthur could be used for such a wonderful symbol of worldly power. On the other hand, the manner in which they picture Arthur indicates that the tales existed in a fairly rough form, quite removed from the final form given them by such writers as Geoffrey of Monmouth: or else public knowledge would have prohibited the writers of vitae from playing so freely with figure of Arthur.

¹⁰ For a good discussion of Gildas, see Christopher Brooke, "St. Peter of Gloucester and St. Cadoc of Llancarfan," in Celt and Saxon, ed. Nora K. Chadwick (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), pp. 299-300.

¹¹ For a dating of the Life of Gildas see Christopher Brooke, "The Archbishops of St. David, Llandaff and Caerleon-on-Usk" in Studies in the Early British Church, p. 230.

The Saint's lives are also interesting because they present Arthur in a guise that is only hinted at in the other early materials: Arthur as the Wild Huntsman. And yet it is this figure of Arthur that is assumed by most of the saintly lives just discussed. The Wild Huntsman is one of the most interesting figures in folk legend, and is by no means limited to Arthur. It is found in one variation or another all over the world, but is especially common in northern European folk tales. The legendary Huntsman usually assumes one of two patterns; and both basic patterns are found in the Arthurian stories as a whole, although the second of the two is the usual pattern in the lives of the saints. In the first form the hunter is clearly a cultic figure--the person who must hunt down the Mother Goddess in one of her many phases, and thereby insure the fertility of the land. The other form of the Wild Huntsman is a much more sinister figure which seems to be connected with the underworld, or an agent of the king.

The Wild Huntsman theme actually begins in Nennius, although it is difficult to say which figure he had in mind in his description. The first incident that is connected with the theme of Arthur as the Wild Huntsman is found in the story of the origin of Carn Cabal, which Nennius says is named after the wonderful hound owned by Arthur; and Nennius tells us that the top stone on the carn contains a foot-print of Cabal--a footprint which would make Cabal a dog to be reckoned with. The other story which might be connected with the Wild Huntsman theme is the story of the shape-changing grave of Arthur's son Anir, who, according to Nennius, was killed by Arthur himself. It is tempting

to throw caution to the wind, and identify this incident in Nennius with the darker side of the Wild Huntsman theme. The murder of the hero's son by the hero is a common mythological theme, and is seen in such stories as the conflict between Zeus and Cronus.¹² It is difficult to say whether any of the elements in Celtic or Druidical religion may lay somewhere behind this story. The incident is not mentioned again after Nennius, and so it can only be a tantalizing loose-end. And yet the ruthless Wild Huntsman was a bringer of death and certainly would not have stopped at even his own son. At any rate the process which was to yield the figure of the Wild Huntsman had already begun as early as Nennius--a source that dates back as early as the Seventh Century according to writers like Roger Sherman Loomis.¹³ It is also worth pointing out that both mythological themes discussed above occur within the context of a fairly sober treatment of Arthur. Arthur is still presented in such a way as to be historically viable; and yet mythological material is already being added to the story, and the process that will yield the later Arthur is already underway.

In the next material in which the Wild Huntsman theme appears, the transition from historical basis to the transhistorical world of myth is already complete. Culhwch and Olwen contains perhaps the best proof for considering Arthur to be connected with the fertility side of the figure of the Wild Huntsman. In this poem

¹² Robert Graves, The Greek Myths, Vol. I (Harmsworth: Penguin Books, 1955), pp. 39ff.

¹³ Roger Sherman Loomis, Wales and Arthur (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1956), p. 60.

Arthur leads his band of men in a number of unusual hunts for almost supernatural stags and other game. The most important hunt for our purposes was the hunt for the great black sow. According to this story the great sow was laying the countryside in ruin, and Arthur and his men set out to kill it. The hunt is described as taking a number of days, and ranging over the entire island of Britain from Wales to Cornwall to Scotland. Clearly the black sow is a mythological figure.

There is, in fact, a mythological explanation for Arthur's hunt, although it should be kept in mind that this is not presented as a source for the story, since there is not enough evidence to support such a claim. The black sow was probably the primeval Mother Goddess herself in her dark phase: (the Moon Goddess often appears in a dark phase, as will be discussed at a later point).¹⁴ For the present it will be sufficient to point out that the Moon Goddess or the Mother Goddess is more than once pictured in folk mythology as the black sow that eats her own litter. Thus Arthur's adventure with the black sow could be read as an attempt by the hero to save the land from sterility and waste by bringing down the figure responsible for life and fertility, and by controlling the destructive side of her nature. However, even without such a mythological reading of the incident, it is quite clear that the hunt for the sow establishes Arthur as an unparalleled huntsman.¹⁵

¹⁴

See Chapter Five, footnote 9, p. 66.

¹⁵

It is interesting to note how long-lived the stories of Arthur as a Huntsman have been. Roger Sherman Loomis, in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, pp. 169-170, records contemporary incidents of the theme in Somerset in the region around Cadbury Castle. There

The Wild Huntsman theme is repeated in most of the other early Welch source such as The Spoils of Annwfn and the Red and White and Black Books. Thus the figure that appears in the saintly lives, which present Arthur as a Wild Huntsman, actually grows out of the legends that are a legitimate part of the early folk treatment of the figure of Arthur. It is tempting to say that the treatments of Arthur in the lives of the Welch saints contain in outline the pattern of development which is generally true of the whole cycle: the story is originally patterned after folk mythology; it is taken over by more civilized writer who restructure it according to their own interests, retaining whatever elements from the mythology are useful for their purpose, and modifying and omitting the rest. The cruder figure of the Huntsman in the saints' lives is the closest to the original folk sources surrounding Arthur; the faithful protector of the church into which the saints transformed the Huntsman is closer to the courtly Arthur who is yet to come.

15(continued)

is even a lane through the woods near the old earth-work that is called Arthur's Track, and local people claim to hear Arthur hunting during the worst part of the winter.

For some reason it is the dark side of Arthur, the Wild Huntsman, which has been retained in folk imagination. To this day in Wales, the sound of geese honking in the night as they fly overhead is called the keening of Arthur's hounds, and the people fear the sound as an omen of danger and death.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIGURES AROUND ARTHUR

The dramatic cast of characters that surrounds the figure of Arthur is one of the most interesting collections in literature. All of the characters, from the strange figure of Merlin to the later Galahad, share at least one thing: their origins are all hidden somewhere in the strange Celtic mists that surround the Arthurian cycle. One writer has suggested that the heroes of folk mythology are almost uniformly figures who once held divine rank, and have been shrunk into human size, while still retaining some of their older attributes. This statement seems to hold true for most of the figures under discussion in this chapter. When studying the characters of the Arthurian literature there is a major temptation to fall victim to the Celtic miasma, and go off wildly in a number of strange directions in a search for their origins. The result of such an exercise usually looks like some sort of strange patchwork quilt that jumps back and forth from Celtic to Irish, to Classical, and even to Indian mythology; and there is some justice in this jumbled mixture. The characters of the Arthurian cycle do seem to be drawn from a number of mythological sources, although the major characters are almost uniformly drawn from Celtic mythological roots.

When one first looks at the list of figures around Arthur it becomes obvious that there are at least several stratas into which the characters may be divided. First of all there is the group which contains Merlin, Taliessin, and Kai- with Sir Gwain probably somewhere in the background. The next strata includes Arthur's Queen, Guinevere, and her companions

such as Morgan le Fee, and Niniane, the Lady of the Lake, who can bewitch even Merlin. The next strata of characters are those who are connected with the Grail Cycle, and they include Lancelot, Percival and Galahad--a rather varied collection of knights. And finally, for the sake of convenience, a host of minor figures which include villains like Mordred, a number of noble knights and fighting men, and even dwarves and elvish characters. (This last listing would exclude figures like the Fisher King and the Grail-Bearer, or King Bron, but they will be discussed in connexion with the Grail cycle.)

Of all of the figures connected with Arthur, Merlin is by far the most interesting. Contrary to such modern writers as T. H. White, Merlin was most certainly not an old man with a grey beard. He is mentioned in the early Welch sources such as Culwich and Owen, The Spoils of Annwfn, The Red Book of Hergest, and The White Book of Rhydderch as a companion of Arthur in some rather hair-raising adventures, and there is no indication that he was considered to be an old man at all--the context would indicate quite the contrary. On the other hand, Merlin is a mysterious figure from the very earliest sources on: perhaps this is why he is pictured later as an elderly wizard. Merlin is described also as having a miraculous birth which in one of the later legends is interpreted as meaning that there was something shady about his background; and so he is pictured as being a son of Satan who nevertheless practices white magic for King Arthur. But there is nothing in the earlier materials to support this development either; except for the fact that the earlier stories seem to indicate that Merlin might have been considered

the son of a god, and old gods were either turned into heroes or into devils.¹ This would be especially true in the case of Merlin, since many of the early stories about him credit him with the power to change his shape if he wished into an animal. In one story he even turns into a wolf, and this ability alone would be enough to discredit his origins in the eyes of Medieval people.

Unlike most of the figures who will be discussed in this chapter, it is more than likely that Merlin actually had an historical antecedent: the figure of Ambrosius, and that Merlin's development proceeds from probably historical origins through Welch mythology to the final figure of the romances in a manner similar to that of Arthur himself. Gildas records the life of an Ambrosius Aurelianus in his history of Britain, and that fabulous figure seems to lie behind the character of Merlin: a descendent of Romanitas whose parents were said to have worn the purple. Not a great deal more is said of him other than the fact that he played a part in the defense of Britain. Ambrosius also appears again in Nennius, but by this time he has become a seer and has already taken upon himself the attributes of the later Merlin. Nennius records an incident in which Ambrosius is called in to explain why the walls of a fortification keep falling down. After brooding for a while he answers that it is because two dragons are fighting underground:

¹An excellent example of this process is found in the Medieval figure of the devil. Actually the devil's horns, tail, and cloven-hooves belong to the figure of Pan. During the Medieval period Pan was demoted, and his characteristics were transferred to Satan.

the red dragon of Wales and the white dragon of the Saxons, and he goes on to predict the fall of Britain to the Saxons.²

The figure in the Welch sources is a combination of the figure from the histories, and Welch ideas about magicians. Perhaps the most interesting element in the Welch tradition that influenced the later stories of Merlin is the "Tale of the Mad Prophet" in which the prophet is pictured as living in the Caledonian Forest, or Coed Celyddon, in an almost animal fashion, wandering around lamenting the events that led him to such a fate. This early Welch tradition about a mad prophet definitely influences the late development of the figure of Merlin, and is the probably explanation of the stories about Merlin and the Fay Niniane, in which Niniane enchants Merlin and turns him into a raving mad-man who lives like an animal in the woods.³ There is also some possibility that Merlin is connected in some way to the Irish figure of Curoi who was a heroic figure with magical powers to change his shape although Curoi is

²This story also occurs in other early Welch folk sources recorded by Alwn and Brinley Rees in Celtic Heritage (New York: Grove Press, 1961), pp. 244 ff.; however the authors feel that the story should really be considered a part of Taliessin's career, rather than that of Merlin. This transfer does not seem to be justified. Both figures had unusual careers, and the story fits Merlin just as well as it does Taliessin. Therefore, there seems to be no reason for assuming that the story in Nennius does not belong to Merlin; in fact the later name Ambrosius Merlinius found in Geoffrey of Monmouth indicates a fusing of Ambrosius and Merlin.

³A. O. H. Jarman, "The Welch Myrddin Poems," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), pp. 20ff.

a late figure, and the connexion may only be that of parallelism.⁴ It is nevertheless in the Welch stories that Merlin (called Myrddin) is given supernatural powers like the ability to change his shape, or to speak to the birds and the trees.⁵ Thus the world in which he moves is the mysterious world of nature mysticism and of the magical lore of the Druids.⁶ This material is gradually fused with the material from the histories, and Merlin becomes known as Merlin Ambrosius⁷--a figure which combines the two sources of traditions in such a way as to produce a figure of sufficient magnitude and interest that Merlin has had independent development in several lives, and a number of minor tales.⁸

Taliessin is another figure like Merlin. At first glance he has all of the characteristic that would lead to an assumption that he is a non-historical figure derived from pagan mythology. Everything

⁴Rees, Celtic Heritage, p. 286.

⁵For an excellent listing of the sources in which Merlin appears, see Jarmen, "The Welch Myrddin Poems", p. 20.

⁶The older Welch sources often connect the hero with Druids in some way, often through a parent or near relative who is called a Druid. See John A. MacCulloch, Celtic Mythology (Boston, Archaeological Institute of America, 1918), p. 167 for an example.

⁷Sir John Rhys, The Hibbert Lectures, 1886 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1888), pp. 153ff.

Rhys traces the development of three Merlins: Merlin Ambrosius, Merlin Caledonius, and Merlin Sylvaticus.

⁸The two major works are Geoffrey of Monmouth's Vita Merelini and the Vulgate Merlin.

about Taliessin seems to be larger than life. He is described as not only the greatest of the bards, but as a seer who possessed magical knowledge as well. Even his name and physical description fits the description of a god, but not a Celtic god: Taliessin has exactly the same meaning as the Greek Apollo; both names meaning "shining brow".⁹ Thus far there would seem to be good reason to say that Taliessin is some sort of Celtic Apollo, and there is evidence to suggest that such a deity did exist in Britain during the period of Roman occupation. The deity was called either Apollo Maponos, or simply Maponos, which is related to the Welch "mapon" or "mabon" which means a boy or a youth,¹⁰ and Taliessin is always described as youthful in spite of his abilities and stature as a supreme poet. In fact "mabon" shows up as the name of one of the minor figures in the stories in which Taliessin appears, and Mabon behaves like a solar-deity -- or rather, like the descendent of one.¹¹

However tempting it is to trace Taliessin back to early pagan sources, there is something about the attempt that does not ring quite true. In the first place, Taliessin is one of those few figures like Merlin, Kai, and Gwain, who keep showing up in the early Welch stories about Arthur. In the second place, Taliessin is treated in the early sources in such a way as to connect him with the bards, and through them,

⁹See Rees, Celtic Heritage, p. 242, for the origin of the name.

¹⁰Rhys, Libbert Lectures, pp. 20ff.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 29ff.

with the mythology of the Druids.¹² He above all knows the ancient secrets of the art of poetry; the same secrets that made the bards an object of suspicion for the Church, since the art of poetry involved knowledge of a world outside of the Christian world, the dark world of paganism.¹³ The fact that Taliessin resembles Apollo, or at least Orpheus, in his attributes, may perhaps be explained by a proper consideration of the high office of poet, and the characteristics that poets were said to have had rather than by any causal relationship between him and an old Welch, or rather Celtic, deity. In early societies the poet was almost divine, and Taliessin was a poet par excellence.¹⁴

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For a good discussion of the issue, see Robert Graves, The White Goddess (New York: Vintage, 1959), pp. 67ff. While Graves is usually irresponsible, this discussion is an exception.

¹³For a consideration of this issue see Chapter One, p.

¹⁴Rees, Celtic Heritage, pp. 230ff.

The poet often made extreme claims for his office. As a bard he claimed super-human powers; thus in the Book of Taliessin he claims:

I have been teacher to all Christendom
I shall be on the face of the earth until
Doom,

And it is not known what my flesh is, whether
flesh or fish.

And he goes on to claim that he witnessed the fall of Lucifer, the Flood, and the Birth and Crucifixion of Christ.

At other places in the book he claims to have been inanimate objects such as an axe, sword, shield, a raindrop, and so on; also to have been a number of different animals such as a bull, stag, dog, salmon, and an eagle--and even grain growing on a hill-side.

Taliessin functions as almost an archetype for the bardic poets. The Book of Taliessin appears to be a collection of early bardic materials which actually spans a fairly considerable period of time. The fact that the whole collection is ascribed to Taliessin does not necessarily mean that Taliessin is a completely mythological figure, and that he never wrote a single poem contained in the collection; it is simply an indication of the manner in which Taliessin acted as a symbol for all Welch poets, and is comparable to the way in which both the Illiad and the Odessey are ascribed to Homer in spite of the obvious differences between the two books. In fact the comparison between the function of Taliessin and that of Homer is a very good indication of the problem faced in determining the historicity of Taliessin. This development is best illustrated by the legend of Taliessin's Chair at Caer Sidi, which is the chair of the chief Bard.¹⁵ There is also a number of tales about Taliessin as a child which indicate that Taliessin was given all the attributes of a hero in popular folk tales. But this is still not the same thing as saying that there was a casual relationship between Taliessin and a pagan deity. As a representative figure of the Welch bards, Taliessin's life would become filled with mythological elements--it could hardly be otherwise since mythology was the stock-in-trade of the bards--but the genesis of Taliessin seems to rest in the way in which he symbolizes the poet and seer, rather than in the mythology.

The figure of Kai, often surnamed "the fair",

¹⁵ Rhys, Hibbert Lectures, p. 550.

is one of the most baffling figures connected with the Arthurian cycle. Kai appears in all of the early Welch stories in which Arthur appears, and he is always associated with Arthur rather closely--often acting as Arthur's second-in-command.¹⁶ And yet by the time of the later stories in the Romances, Kai has been demoted to nothing more than a chief cook for the royal household without any explanation at all, and he has also been characterized as a curlish fellow to boot. There is nothing about Kai in the earlier stories to indicate that such was to be his fate, and unless we accept a theory advanced by Alwyn and Brinley Rees that it is because he was connected in some way with a rather unpleasant Celtic figure, there seems to be no reason for his demotion.¹⁷ Actually the Rees's theory seems to rest upon a parallel between the figures of Curoi and Kai as presented in the later stories, and does not take the earlier figure of Kai into proper consideration, so we appear to be left with a mystery.

This leaves the figure of Gwain as the last of the major figures associated with Arthur who seems to have roots in the ancient Celtic stories. Not a great deal is said of Gwain in the earliest Welch materials, although there is a major development in the later materials, especially those materials which make up the Grail Cycle. Sir Gwain seems to be an almost picaresque hero. He is at once well-meaning and noble knight, and

¹⁶ An excellent example is the role which he plays in Culwich and Olwen. For other examples see MacCulloch, Celtic Mythology, pp. 199ff.

¹⁷ For the Rees's theory see Celtic Heritage, pp. 184-185.

at the same time almost completely amoral: Sir Gwain cannot seem to be able to resist a pretty girl. And yet, in spite of his all too human failings, he seems to be the descendent of a sun god of some sort. Actually such a connexion is the probable explanation for both his heroic role, and his notable failures in the realm of chastity. Solar deities, or heroes descended from solar deities, are not notable for their chastity, since their primary role is one of bringing life out of the conquest over darkness. Thus the career of Gwain, like the career of the Irish Cuchulin,¹⁸ is one series of noble adventures and conquests over the powers of darkness, and one series of escapades with the damsels he rescues from distress. And yet the figure of Gwain is important enough to share honours with Percival, who is much more respectable, and Galahad, who is impeccable, in the quest for the Holy Grail.

The most immediate indication that Sir Gwain descended from a solar hero is to be found in his association with Arthur's rather shady queen, Guenivere. Gwain, rather than Arthur himself, is the figure who rescues her from the under-world to which she has been carried. Here again Gwain fulfills the same function as Cuchulin in his rescue of life from the kingdom of death: the sun hero is always destined to be victorious over darkness. Another of the legends connected with solar hero is found in the late Medieval English poem, Sir Gwain and the Green Knight: the Beheading Test. The Test seems to be derived from some sort of encounter

¹⁸Roger Sherman Loomis, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927) pp. 12-16.

between the old and young sun-gods, in which the young god replaces the older one, until he in turn becomes old and is challenged, with the cycle then beginning over again. Again, as in his rescue of Guenivere, Sir Gwain's experience with the Green Knight is almost exactly the same as one of the adventures of Cuchulin.¹⁹ This test is also found in another Celtic parallel, "The Champion's Bargain," in Bricriu's Feast, an Irish work whose manuscript dates about 1100, and appears to have much older origins in folk literature.²⁰

But the strongest case for the fact that Gwain is a solar hero rests in his birth and early childhood. Gwain was reported to be born as the result of incest, which follows the basic pattern for a solar hero, and is very similar to the unusual birth of Cuchulin.²¹ Like Cuchulin he was a child prodigy and performed a number of remarkable feats while still a child, and grew up into a handsome youth with whom all women fell in love. When this is added to the recurring statement that Gwain's strength increased until noon, and after noon declined, the case for Gwain as a solar hero arising out of Welch and other Celtic mythology is almost assured.

This brings up the curious fact that the life of Gwain in the Arthurian romances is almost identical

¹⁹Ibid., p. 59.

²⁰J. R. R. Tolkien in the introduction to Sir Gwain and the Green Knight, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930) p. xii.

²¹MacCulloch, Celtic Mythology, pp. 139ff.

to the legends surrounding the figure of Pope Gregory the Great, and that a connexion is made between Gwain and the pope in several Arthurian romances. It has been claimed that the Gregorian legend existed prior to the stories about Gwain, but such a theory does not seem to be acceptable. There is no reason which comes to mind quickly for wishing to show that a pope was born as the result of incest. Nevertheless the pattern is the same in tales of Gregory's birth as it is in that of Gwain or even Mordred. The only logical explanation is to say that both legends were derived from the same source. Roger Sherman Loomis has proposed the theory that an alternative Coptic myth may have been the source for both legends, but he goes on to point out that the Gregorian material has a number of details which could not have come from anywhere other than Celtic sources.²² His conclusion is not altogether satisfying however. The stories about Gregory are of a later origin than the Welch proto-types for the Gwain stories--perhaps even later than the Gwain stories themselves--and the motive for a pious invention of the Gregorian materials seems lacking. Therefore it seems more likely that the legend about Gregory the Great is probably derived from the stories about Gwain, and through them, the Celtic mythology that provided the basis for the development of the figure of Gwain.

The next stratum of tradition concerning the characters of the Arthurian Cycle is a strange trio of ladies which includes Guinevere, Arthur's Queen; Morgan

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Loomis, Celtic Mythology, pp. 331 ff.

le Fee, Arthur's sister; and Niniane, Merlin's mistress, the Lady of the Lake, possibly another form of Morgan le Fee but also perhaps the Grail-Bearer (the person who takes Arthur to the enchanted island when he is mortally wounded in his last battle against Mordred). All of these ladies are figures of doubtful virtue, and share the same mysterious background which makes it seem probable that they all are derived from Celtic fays--thus sharing the strange half-light somewhere between the twilight of the gods and their re-emergence into the folk world of the later fairy tradition.

Of the four ladies under discussion, Guinevere is the easiest to trace because of the importance of her role in the Arthurian Cycle as Arthur's queen. Actually Guinevere seems to come from a long line of nature myths, the most famous of which is the story of Persephone. Thus it is not surprising that very early in her career she developed the unfortunate habit of being raped (that is, abducted, old-style). Otherwise it would be somewhat of a puzzle why the queen of as great a hero as Arthur could manage to get herself carried off quite so often. As a flower maiden connected with spring and fertility, it was her lot to be snatched up by the king of the Underworld and carried off to his gloomy Castle. This is exactly what Mordred, or Medrot, or King Melwis or Melegant did quite often.²³ In this context it would seem to be safe to assume that the figures who carry her off are Kings of the Underworld, and that her natural rescuer would be a sun god, or at least a solar hero of

²³ Kenneth G. T. Webster, Guinevere: A Study in Her Abductions (Milton, Massachusetts: Turtle Press, 1951), p. 29 ff.

some sort; and this deduction is borne out by the details of the stories. In the version of Guenivere's abduction by King Melwis described in the life of Saint Gildas, Guinevere is carried off to the King's enchanted castle located on the Isle of Apples at Glastonbury--²⁴ which we have already shown is connected with the Celtic other-world in many Welch traditions--and she is rescued by Sir Gwain, who has been shown to be related to the earlier Welch solar heroes. In fact the whole episode is paralleled in Celtic myth by the story of Blathnat (a flower maiden like Guinevere), and her rescue from King Curoi (a king of the Underworld) by Cuchulin (a perfect solar hero who is often the exact parallel to Sir Gwain).²⁵

Thus, having established some connexion between Guinevere and Welch flower maidens, some of the other details in her story are much easier to understand. In Classical mythology, Persephone was both the personification of the life-giving seasons of Spring and Summer and the Queen of the Underworld, the wife of its king, Pluto: she had both a positive and a less positive side to her nature that is derived from the seasons. Perhaps this is why Guinevere is described in some stories as being married to someone else besides Arthur, or that her other husband is Medrot, or Melegant, who carries her off to the Underworld: in a real sense it is appropriate for a flower maiden to have two husbands; one representing her spring and summer aspect, the other representing her fall and winter aspect.

²⁴See Chapter Two, p. 22.

²⁵MacCulloch, Celtic Mythology, p. 151; and Rees, Celtic Heritage, p. 286.

Such a connexion with flower maidens is also the probable explanation for Guinevere's failure to be a perfect wife to Arthur. A flower maiden, or a fay, would be a beautiful wife, but not an easy one to live with. A fay would constantly test her earthly lover, as Guinevere did Arthur, in the same manner that a swan-maiden would,²⁶ and it is more than likely that a fay would not prove to be very faithful either, as is seen in Guinevere's adultery in some versions of the romances. Nor would a fay be above the final treachery found in the alliterative Morte d'Arthur: the delivery of Arthur's own magical sword into the hands of Mordred by Guinevere herself--thus making it possible for Mordred to mortally wound Arthur. A fay would have no sense of loyalty or love toward her human husband. Therefore it seems safe to say that Guinevere is a fay; and that her character, and many of the incidents in her career, is derived from Celtic folklore and mythology.

In the case of Morgan le Fee the connexion is already provided by the name she is given in the French romances. Yet in spite of the French form of her name, "Morgan" is apparently a native Welch name meaning "sea-born;" a very appropriate name for Morgan, as we shall soon see.²⁷ Most of the romances agree that she is at least a half-sister of Arthur; and that she possesses magical powers to fly through the air to perform difficult cures, and even to turn into a bird, and to do a

²⁶For a good idea of exactly how much trouble a fay could be, see John Fiske, Myths and Myth-makers (Cambridge: Houghton-Mifflin, 1900), pp. 94-100.

The argument of the book is highly suspect, but it contains a fine collection of folk stories.

²⁷Rhys, Hibbert Lectures, p. 229.

number of other things which indicates that like Guinevere, she is a fay, probably a water nymph. In fact she resembles Guinevere in almost all respects: she is possessed of a strange dark beauty, and her character is not completely pure. In some stories she is faithful to her brother but in others she is not; often trying to discredit or test him. It is Morgan le Fee who discloses the adultery of Guinevere and Lancelot in the prose Lancelot, largely out of a desire to spite Arthur. Finally she is often pictured as having a fay's lack of morality in Lancelot and in the Vulgate Merlin, where she pursues Lancelot in an attempt to seduce him.

Perhaps the most obvious treatment of Morgan as a fay comes in the French poem Yvain where she is called "Morgue la sage",²⁸ that is "Morgan the Wise", wise being a term used in Celtic mythology to indicate either a witch or a fay. Morgan is described as being famous for her healing power, and for her ability to turn into a bird, both attributes belonging to a water nymph; and thus very appropriate if her name really does come from the Welch "Morgan". In the Welch parallel to Yvain, Owein, the hero is described as being accompanied by a "Flight of Ravens" which always brought him victory.²⁹ This would appear to be Morgan and her daughters in the form of ravens, since Morgan appears in the Welch poem Rhonabwy's Dream in a similar incident, where she and

²⁸ Idris Llewelyn Foster, "Gereint, Owein, and Peredur," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, p. 198, gives an excellent characterization of Morgan le Fay.

²⁹ The Mabinogion, trans. by Gwyn and Thomas Jones (London: Everyman's Library, 1949), p. 182.

and her daughters take the form of ravens to protect Owein, who is portrayed as her son.³⁰

The most consistent role played by Morgan is in her relationship to Arthur and the Myth of Avalon discussed in Chapter Two. As early as 1216, Giraldus Cambrensis describes Morgan as the fay presiding over Avalon, in his Speculum Ecclesiae, in which he records a fable that Arthur was transported to Avalon by an imaginary goddess named Morganis to have his wounds healed.³¹ This same connexion of Morgan and her healing gifts with Avalon is found in Robert de Boron, where Morgan, this time called "Morghain", takes Arthur to Avalon; and of course this duplicated by the Vulgate La Mort Artu where the wounded Arthur is carried off by Morgan on a barge; only in the Vulgate form of the story it is clear that her healing does not work, and that Arthur dies from his wounds.

This link between Morgan and Avalon would be enough to prove that Morgan was a fay even without the stories which tell of her ability to turn into a raven,

³⁰Such a statement rests on the argument that the figure of Morgan is associated with both the ancient Celtic figure of Morrigan, who often assumed the shape of a crow, and Modron, the mother of Owain in Rhonabwy's Dream. Both A. L. Patton in Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1903) pp. 148-156, and Roger Sherman Loomis in Arthurian Tradition and Chretien de Troyes (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949) pp. 69ff, and Wales and the Arthurian Tradition (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1956), pp. 95-97, have done so.

³¹

Quoted in Edmund K. Chambers, Arthur of Britain (London: Collins, 1927), p. 272.

or the other stories in which she acts in a manner typical of a fay. But the connexion with Avalon does more than merely that: it provides a clue as to where the figure of Morgan came from in the first place. The connexion between Morgan and Avalon suggests that Morgan's ancestry is exactly the same as that of the Grail-Bearer; that Morgan is really the descendent of the Sovereignty of Ireland, the moon goddess herself. And there are occasional hints in the stories about Morgan which seem to support such a conjecture.

The treatment of Morgan in Geoffrey of Monmouth includes a number of themes associated with the figure of the Grail-Bearer as discussed in Chapter Four. It is quite clear that in Geoffrey the Isle of Apples to which Morgan takes Arthur is the Island in the Western Sea.³² Even more interesting is the fact that Morgan is joined by eight sisters at the island, making the number of fays on the island the magical number nine.³³ Nor is Geoffrey the only source in which the similarity between the two figures is striking: in the Vulgate Lancelot, Morgan is pictured as almost a hag at one point, while at other times she is middle-aged, and at another point appears to Lancelot as a young girl: again this appearance in trinity suggests a relationship between Morgan and the figure from whom the Grail-Bearer was derived. Thus Morgan's ancestry may go back as far as Eriu herself.³⁴

³²See John J. Parry and Robert A. Caldwell, "Geoffrey of Monmouth," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, p. 92.

³³See Chapter Four, p. 52.

³⁴Rees, Celtic Heritage, p. 167.

Niniane, the Lady of the Lake, is the last figure in the trio of fays who play an important role in the Arthurian cycle. Of the three she is really the least significant, and seems to be derived from Guinevere to a slight degree, and from Morgan to a far greater degree. Like Morgan she appears to be a water nymph of some sort, as would be suggested by her title, Lady of the Lake.³⁶ She appears in only two major sections of the Arthurian cycle; the Vulgate Merlin, and the Suite du Merlin discovered by Vinivar. Neither of these stories belongs to the primary level of the Arthurian tales; and there is no trace of her, or even a figure like her--except for Morgan--in the earlier stories. Nevertheless she is connected with a part of the Arthurian Cycle that is derived from early Welch sources--Merlin as the mad prophet--and she came to be associated with the Wood of Broceliande in Wales.³⁷ Again, this would suggest that she is a figure derived from Morgan le Fee.

The final group of figures which remains to be discussed includes Percival, Lancelot, and Galahad, all of whom are connected with the Grail cycle. Of these four figures, Percival is probably the most important. It is Percival who shares honors with Gwain as the hero of the Grail Quest in Chretien de

³⁶Niniane (Viviane) attracted Merlin by her beauty and magical powers, even though he had foreseen the danger that such a fate lay in store for him; and she enchanted him into a deep sleep entombed under a hill in Wales where he is to remain for centuries.

³⁷

In the Vulgate Merlin.

Troyes; and of the two figures, Percival is usually portrayed as the more noble--lacking a number of Gwain's failings (concerning the fair sex, for example). He is also a less authentic hero than Gwain; thus it is not surprising that there is not the same connexion between Percival and folk sources that exists for Gwain.³⁸

It is interesting to note at this point that Percival, although he is usually associated with Wales, first appears in Chretien de Troyes. The Welch poem Peredur appears to be later in origin than the work of Chretien. And yet, Percival is connected with Wales even in Chretien de Troyes Le Conte du Graal. Chretien tells of Percival's birth and youth in a forest in Wales. Nor is that the only link with Wales. Even if Peredur were later than Le Conte du Graal, the Grail is not the theme of Peredur; in fact the Grail does not even appear in the poem. On the contrary, there is a number of incidents in Peredur which are clearly derived from Welch folk themes, such as the killing of the Witches of Caerloyw and the Killing of Addanc (some sort of Welch dragon).³⁹ And even in the continuation of Le Conte du Graal, the story of the vengeance quest in which Percival tracks down the murder of his cousin (whose severed head has been shown to him on the Holy Grail itself) is a Welch story.⁴⁰ And finally, the

³⁸Loomis takes exception with this statement on the basis of an affair which may be traced back to Celtic tradition. But I would maintain that Percival is not in the same category with Gwain when it comes to amours. See Loomis, Arthurian Tradition in Chretien de Troyes, pp. 414ff.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 219; 455ff.

⁴⁰See Chapter Five, p. 75.

incident in Robert de Boron where Percival sets out to hunt down a great white stag seems to be derived from Welch sources also.⁴¹

Thus, Percival is a somewhat puzzling figure. He is clearly associated with Wales, as has been pointed out, and yet he is not mentioned in the earlier Arthurian sources as one of Arthur's companions. It seems likely that he is a literary figure who grew out of the same tales in which the more primary figures such as Gwain, Merlin, Taliessin, and Kai play a part. Thus his connexion with Wales is not as firm as is theirs, and his character is more plastic precisely because he is not as deeply associated with Welch mythology. Therefore it is not surprising that he was picked up by Wolfram von Eschenbach as the hero for Parzival; there was no major reason why he couldn't be turned into a romantic hero.

Lancelot is another figure like Percival; he is primarily a literary figure. He first appears in association with Guinevere as the perfect knight in Chretien de Troyes; but before the process is complete his character becomes weakened until in the Queste del Saint Graal he has an adulterous affair with Guinevere, and by the end of La Mort Artu, the only way he can atone for all his sins is to become a hermit. And yet, Lancelot always retains a knightly presence about him even in the later tales, and he is usually repentant before the tale is over. The prose Lancelot provides the most typical outline for his career: he is born,

⁴¹Pierre le Gentil, "The Work of Robert de Boron," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, p. 258.

and like Percival, Gwain, and most heroes, he is taken to an out of the way place to be raised. At the age of eighteen he is knighted by Arthur and for the next few years is a perfect knight (during this time he is the father of Galahad by the daughter of the Grail King--a strange way for so noble a hero to be born). He then falls into disgrace with Guinevere. At last he is contrite, and the tale reads like a sermon for chastity.⁴²

Also in the case of Lancelot, as in that of Percival, there does not seem to be any major connexion between Welch sources and the development of his character; beyond those few traits which characterize most heroes, he does not even seem to have mythological overtones. It is true that a few stories, such as his rescue of Guinevere in Chretien de Troyes, seem to have some relationship to Welch sources, but such incidents are very few, and when they do occur they are in association with Guinevere who does appear to be derived from Welch mythology.⁴³

Galahad is even more obviously removed from the world of myth than either Percival or Lancelot. His principle characteristics are purity and nobility, and neither characteristic was the stock-in-trade of Celtic

⁴²Frappier, "The Vulgate Cycle", pp. 300-301.

⁴³For a partial objection to such a statement see Tom P. Cross and William A. Nitze, Lancelot and Guinevere (Chicago: University Press, 1930). The point of issue should be the character of Lancelot, and not the tales of what happened to him. The few stories which Cross and Nitze trace to Wales are all connected with Guinevere in some way; none deal with Lancelot alone.

myth. Rather he belongs to the later strata of tradition surrounding the Grail Cycle in which Christian symbolism was beginning to get the upper hand over the pagan origins of the material. Not that the victory was ever complete, however: Galahad was born as the result of a strange act on the part of the Grail King who contrived to have Lancelot sleep with his daughter.⁴⁴ Thus Galahad's origin is a little unusual for the prime example of knightly and Christian virtue in the Grail Cycle. Still, with that exception which harks back to the mythology of the hero, Galahad seems to be a Christian figure--one who was destined to replace Lancelot as the embodiment of chivalry.

There are of course, a number of other figures whose careers could be traced in the same manner. For example there are figures such as Belevidere in the later romances who is most probably derived from Bedwyr,⁴⁵ a figure who appears in such early sources as Culhwch and Olwen, the Book of Taliessin, and the Red Book of Hergest as a constant companion of Arthur in his early deeds, and quite obviously is related to Welch mythology. Or another figure like Tristan, who has considerable development apart from the Arthurian cycle, especially in Germany in the story of Tristan and Isolde; and yet appears to be derived from the figure of Drystan

44

The prose Lancelot.

45

Rachel Bromwich, "The Welch Triads", in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, p. 34.

from the triads in the Red Book of Hergest.⁴⁶

Among the most obvious examples of folk derivation of figures in the Arthurian cycle are the dwarves and fairies. Celtic mythology is so filled with such figures that it is unnecessary to go into great detail. What does need to be shown is that the dwarves and fairies in the Arthurian stories follow a pattern that is specifically Celtic, and this has already been done with great care by Vernon Harwood.⁴⁷ Especially interesting is the way in which Harwood shows the development of the figure of Pelles, the son of the Fisher King in the Arthurian, stories to be derived from the figure of the Welch dwarf god Beli.⁴⁸

Unfortunately there is not space to continue the analysis of the development of the characters of the Arthurian Cycle. But in conclusion it seems fair to say that the mythological origins and contents of the Arthurian cycle are what made the Matter of Britain spread across the face of Western Europe. The historical figure of Arthur as it may be reconstructed by contemporary research certainly was not the reason why The Matter of France yielded to the Matter of Britain. Rather it seems more probable that it was the mythological dimension that makes such stories as "Little Red

⁴⁶Tristan is definitely connected with South Wales in the early Breton lais, and the change in the form of the name follows normal linguistic rules. See Ernest Hoepffner, "The Breton Lais," in Arthurian Literature, p. 117.

⁴⁷Vernon R. Harwood, The Dwarfs of the Arthurian Romance and Celtic Myth (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958), pp. 19ff.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 44.

Riding Hood" or "Sleeping Beauty" transcend not only national boundaries, but the barrier of Oriental and Occidental cultures as well, that made the Arthurian cycle become the popular possession of Western Europe. And it is this dimension that begins to enter the stories of Arthur in the hands of the Welch bards: Guenivere and her rescue, the Grail stories, the cast of people that surround Arthur: Merlin, the symbol of the wisdom of the Druids; Taliessin, the voice of the Bards themselves, a Celtic Orpheus; Gwain; and the whole race of heroes larger than life. Before the poets are done, they all take upon themselves something of the nature of the gods--what the Scandinavians called "glamour", the power to appear more than mortal.

CHAPTER V

THE HIGH HISTORY OF THE HOLY GRAIL

Of all of the elements in the Arthurian cycle, the high history of the Holy Grail is one of the most mysterious. The Grail does not appear as such in the earliest strata of Welch materials. Actually the Grail is not really a part of the Welch and later English strata of the legends surrounding Arthur at all. Most of its development takes place on foreign soil, France and later Germany. This fact has always been something of a puzzle, since a connexion between England and the Holy Grail would have resounded to the glory of England. And yet the monks of the Abbey of Glastonbury, who connected themselves with the Arthurian legend, steadfastly refused to have anything to do with the Grail legend; and even went so far as to fabricate an alternative legend about Joseph of Arimathea and cruets containing blood from the Crucifixion to replace the legend of the Grail.¹

Even when the Grail does appear in France and Germany, there are strange loose ends about it. The Grail is described in an amazing number of ways. In Chretien de Troyes, the Holy Grail is described as a dish like the one from which Jesus ate at the Last Supper; in the later legends it may be anything from the chalice that was used at the Last Supper, to a cup used by Joseph of Arimathea to catch blood flowing from the wounded side of Jesus at Cavalry, to a platter

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J. Armitage Robinson, Two Glastonbury Legends (Cambridge: University Press, 1926), p. 65ff.

containing the head of a man (possibly the head of John the Baptist),² even to a miraculous stone with the power to preserve youth. Nor is that the end of the matter. The Holy Grail may be carried by a fair young maiden, or it may just appear of its own will floating in the air covered with a glowing white veil. Nor is even that the end of the matter. In addition to containing the human head, or the blood of Christ already mentioned, it may also contain a single mass wafer upon which its guardian feeds solely, or it may contain freshly caught fish, or it may even be an horn of plenty spilling out all sorts of fruits and other foods. Finally there is the matter of the keeper of the Grail and the nature of his realm. The keeper of the Grail may be a figure named Bran who is famous for his lavish entertainment of guests, a figure whose realm is one of great fertility; or he may be the Fisher King who is mysteriously wounded³ and languishing in a half-magical castle while the land around him lies in waste and sterility; or again, the keeper may be a similar figure named King Pellès; and finally he may even be Joseph of Arimathea himself, mysteriously alive in spite of the fact that his sons have all died from old age. Thus the story of the Holy Grail is a complicated story indeed, and what should be,

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But possibly the magical head of Bran mentioned in the Welch triads. For a treatment of Bran in the Arthurian Legend see Melaine Newstead, Bran the Blessed in Arthurian Romance (New York: Columbia University 1939).

3

Actually the wound from which the Fisher King is suffering is not mysterious at all. See Jessie Weston, The Quest for the Holy Grail (London: George Bell, 1913), p. 80.

on the surface, the most Christian of the elements in the Arthurian cycle turns out to be something with a mysterious past: something which is not obviously Christian in nature or origin--something which might have little or nothing to do with Christianity at all.

The immediate problem that is raised by the ambiguity of the Holy Grail is where to begin the process of investigating the origins of the Holy Grail. There is no use at all in turning to early Christian traditions about the Holy Grail: for all practical purposes, such legends do not exist at all. Nor is there any use in turning to the development of legends in England concerning the Holy Grail specifically: in almost all cases such legends are actually no older than the Continental legends; in fact most of them are later in origin than are the Continental ones. And yet the legends of the Holy Grail did not spring up suddenly from nowhere at the end of the twelfth century; they must have come from somewhere. The only early source that we can turn to is the body of early Welch tales which deal with Arthur; and when we turn to the writings of the Welch bards we enter a mysterious land indeed, a land in which almost anything is possible.

Perhaps the most improbable place to begin looking for the origins of the Holy Grail are the mysterious islands in the Western Sea that play such an important part in the earlier Welch stories about Arthur; and yet they are probably the best place to begin the search. The principle sources for the stories about Arthur's adventures in the Western Sea are Culhwch and Olwen, The Spoils of Annwfn, The Book of Taliessin, The Red

Book of Hergest, and the White Book of Rhydderch; an impressive list; in fact, almost the complete body of Welch Sources.⁴ The nature of sources from this period has already been discussed, and it is sufficient at this point to simply state that while such stories represent Arthur in a manner that is closer to the historical basis of the myth than are the later romances, the world of the Welch poems is not an historical world either: in fact, it is a transhistorical world of myth and archetypes.

The island that Arthur and a band of warriors attacks or visits in the early Welch sources is apparently some sort of Celtic otherworld. First of all it was located at some distant point off in the Western sea. The placing of the Celtic other-world on an island in the Western Sea is paralleled in Norse mythology by a paradise somewhere in the Western sea to which the heroes went after death.⁵ The Norse realm, and the Celtic other-world as well, was differentiated from Hel, the other-world to which most spirits went, which was a dim subterranean world very similar to Hades in classical Greek mythology, and was described as a golden land in which there was no pain or suffering where the spirits of the heroes spent most of their time in feasting.⁶ To a very great extent, it could also be described as a land of

⁴This list includes all of the early Welch poetic materials except the Welch triads.

⁵E. O. G. Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 271, presents a cautious discussion of the paradisiacal Island in the Western Sea. For a less hesitant treatment of the theme see John A. MacCulloch, The Religion of the Ancient Celts (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1911) p. 330 ff.

⁶MacCulloch, The Religion of the Ancient Celts, p. 337.

perpetual youth and happiness. When a chieftian or warrior died, his body was interred in a ship to journey to the land in the distant sea somewhere between the world of men (the middle earth) and the distant realm of the gods in the far west.⁷ In the later Irish mythology this land appears as the Island of Apples, with all of the same Island of Apples to which Arthur goes after he receives his fatal wound in several stories in the Arthurian cycle.⁸

The lord of the Island in the Western Sea is usually called Bron, or Bran in the Welch mythology, and is described in such a way as to make him appear to be a fertility god of some sort. Not only is his land a land of fertility and perpetual youth, but King Bron himself is described as being a radiant being who possesses magical powers. He lives in a magical castle in which a strange sort of timelessness exists; a castle that is easy to enter, but very difficult to leave. Even more unusual than Bron's castle are some of his possessions. Bron owns a magical lance that is capable of doing great destruction--great enough to lay waste to a whole kingdom--and he possesses a magical cauldron which is always filled to overflowing with food, no matter how much food is taken from it. Finally there is the matter of Bron's companions: they are either a band of heroes who perpetually feast with Bron, or they are a mysterious band of nine witches who stand guard over the magical kettle.⁹ Thus King Bron is pictured as a strange sort

⁷Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, p. 271.

⁸MacCulloch, The Religion of the Ancient Celts, pp. 363, 369.

⁹The nine witches are another evidence of the fertility religion origin of the stories concerning the

of figure; at once a fertility figure and a king of the underworld.¹⁰ This pattern which connects death and life seems surprising at first glance, but is not at all surprising when it is compared to other figures in Norse mythology: the same sort of connexion is made in the case of the Vanir who are specifically gods of fertility.¹¹ Even the mysterious wound from which either King Pellas or the Fisher King suffers is connected with Bran; as a God of the Sea among the Welch: Bran has a wounded foot.

The earliest story in which Arthur visits the Island in the Western Sea is Culhwch and Olwen. In this

⁹(continued)

magical kettle. The original fertility deity, even in Britain seems to have been a mother-goddess figure. (See E. O. James, Myth and Ritual in the Ancient Near East (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958), pp. 142-143). The Mother Goddess was a moon goddess, and was usually conceived of as a trinity. Quite often her three main manifestations (the waxing moon, as a young maiden--Aphrodite; the full moon, mature fertility--Hera; and, finally, the dark of the moon, the death goddess--Hecate) also under-went tripartite division, and the Mother Goddess was represented as nine fates.

¹⁰This view is also held by such diverse Arthurian scholars as Arthur A. L. Brown, selected papers on the Arthurian Legend and the Grail bound by Harvard University Library; Helaine Newstead, Bran the Blessed in Arthurian Romance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939); Sir John Rhys, Celtic Folklore (Oxford, 1909) and Studies in the Arthurian Myth (Oxford: University Press, 1891); and Roger Sherman Loomis, The Grail from Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol (Cardiff: The University of Wales, 1963) and Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927).

¹¹Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, pp. 165ff.

tale Arthur visits the Island in the Western Sea with a band of men for the express purpose of capturing the magical cauldron belonging to King Bron. After a series of minor disasters they reach the island (it is interesting to note that as God of the Sea Bron could logically be expected to cause the type of natural disasters that plagued Arthur's trip) only to find the castle and the cauldron of plenty guarded by nine dreaded witches. Arthur and his men are unable to steal the cauldron, and Arthur barely escapes home with his life.

The same mythological theme is followed in The Spoils of Annwfn, except in this work it is even more obvious that Cair Siddi is, in fact, the King of the Celtic underworld. Great emphasis is placed upon the agelessness of the castle and the people in it; and again Arthur escapes by a very slim margin. The same basic pattern that is true of the Island in the Western Sea in Culhwch and Owen and The Spoils of Annwfn is repeated in The Red Book of Hergest and The White Book of Rhydderch as well: Arthur is out to capture a magical cauldron that has the power to restore fertility to the land in which it is kept; thus Arthur goes to the island in an attempt to restore life to the countryside. It is not until the slightly later Book of Taliessin that the cauldron is demoted from a fertility object to a mere kettle filled with treasure.

All of these adventures are in keeping with the figure of Arthur as it develops within the Welch Sources. Arthur is an heroic figure that acts as if he were a solar deity of some sort. The nature of development of Arthur as the once and future king will be discussed in the following chapter. For the present it is enough to say that Arthur, and the stories about the Island in the

Western Sea seem to be connected with some sort of fertility religion that is derived from Welch paganism. It also seems true to say that the story of the wounded king is connected with fertility in the early stories. It is even true that there seems to be a relationship between The Holy Grail and the Horn of Plenty which must be rescued from the Underworld if life and fertility are to be restored to the countryside. It is probable that Arthur, in these stories, may be descended from some sort of ethnic hero upon whose actions the well-fare of the community depends. But there is nothing about either Arthur himself, or the Holy Grail that demands that one resort to Jessie Weston's theory of a lost mystery cult brought to Britain by traders from the Mediterranean area: The Welch stories of the Island in the Western Sea, King Bran, and the magic cauldron, or horn of plenty, are sufficient explanation for the images in the later tales concerning the Holy Grail; and they appear to belong solidly to the same context that produced the Norse mythology.¹²

¹²Jessie L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1952).

Jessie Weston's basic thesis seems to be very sound: Arthurian Romance is largely derived from a pagan mythological basis retained in popular imagination, especially folklore. Where she is less than sound is in the details which she uses to establish her case. A lost mystery cult cannot be produced without more solid evidence to back it up. In addition, the ritual basis is not needed. Folk material may exist for centuries, and even undergo extensive development, without a ritual basis. What is even more important about the pagan mythology than its origin is its survival into the Christian period, and the transformation that takes place when pagan myth is forced to co-exist with the Christian mythos; for example the changes wrought in such stories as Beowulf.

Here again we are faced with the same problem that is faced every time we attempt to analyze any major element in the Arthurian cycle: how was the transmission from the early Welch sources and the later versions of the story that spread over all of civilized Europe accomplished? It is very well to show parallels in mythological materials; but it is another thing to connect eighth-, ninth-, and tenth-century Wales with the European developments of the twelfth, thirteen, and fourteenth centuries. At the present time, there is not enough material in existence to prove a major connexion beyond contention, but fortunately there are a few fragments of evidence to suggest that there is a connexion, without having to rely exclusively upon evidence from within the later tales themselves; and when they are added to the internal evidence, a case for Welch influence upon the later Continental stories of the Holy Grail seems to rest upon fairly firm ground.

First of all there is a cultural link between the Welch who produced the material under discussion, and the people of Brittany. In the period of strife between the Welch and the invading Anglo-Saxons, large numbers of native Britons fled to the less vulnerable coast of Gaul; enough for one whole province of the later Frankish kingdom to retain the name Brittany. As Roger Sherman Loomis has pointed out, this meant that there was an enclave on the Continent who shared a common cultural background with the Welch, and even the same language for at least a fair period of time.¹³ Apparently

¹³Roger Sherman Loomis, "The Oral Diffusion of the Arthurian Legend" in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. Loomis (Oxford: University Press, 1959)), p. 55.

some sort of communication between Wales and Brittany continued to exist down into the period under discussion. The legend of Arthur's return, which will be discussed in the following chapter, was known in Brittany within a short while after the first remaining records of its occurrence in Britain itself.

There is also definite literary evidence that at least one Welch bard migrated to France. A short note exists to the effect that an individual by the name of Bleheris, who was a member of the court of William, Count of Poitou (in all probability William VII, Count of Poitou, Duke of Aquitaine, since the record dates no later than 1098 at the most conservative dating), came from Wales to serve as th court bard. The document goes on to say that he was well-liked because of the tales he told about the adventures of Art'ur of Britain. This link between the court bards of France and the bards of Wales seems to have existed over a fairly considerable span of time.¹⁴ There is a number of French epics such as the Couronnement Louis (1130) and the Ferlerinage Charlemagne (1109-45) which show the influences of a Welch bard. The Couronnement Louis actually continues some of the stories about Arthur under discussion in this chapter; and although the Ferlerinage Charlemagne is not about Arthur at all, there is, according to Loomis, a major use of motifs and mythology that is either generally Celtic or related directly to the Arthurian legend. And finally, if the literary evidence is not enough, there is architectural evidence that the stories of Arthur under discussion were known in Europe

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 57-58.

early enough to be the foundation of the later Grail stories. As far away from Wales as Northern Italy, Arthur and his trip to the Island in the Western Sea shows up in stone on the archivolt of the parish Church in Modena; and even accepting the most recent possible dating by art historians, the group dates from no later than the early part of the twelfth century--actually earlier than the first piece of Continental poetry which belongs to the Grail cycle.¹⁵

There seems to be little doubt that the first story of the Grail, Chretien de Troyes Conte del Graal, is related to the tradition of the bards. In the first place the poem is a rather rough and loose-jointed affair. Chretien states in the Conte del Graal that he is merely putting into rhyme a series of stories from a book belonging to Count Phillip; therefore it is not at all surprising that the incidents concerning Gwain and those concerning the more noble Percival do not really fit together. But an even more obvious connexion with the bards exists in the continuations of the story written by later authors: the later continuations are structured even more loosely than the original section by Chretien, and appear to be bardic in origin.¹⁶ Even more characteristic of bardic authorship in the sections under

¹⁵For an illustration of the Modena see Loomis, Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, plate 2, opposite p. 60.

¹⁶For a discussion of the structure of the continuations of Chretien de Troyes, see Jessie L. Weston, Continuations of the Old French 'Perceval' (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1950), pp. 250 ff.

For a listing of the continuations, and a brief characterization of each, see Roger Sherman Loomis,

discussion is the moral ambivalence: they portray either a pious or an almost completely amoral figure without commenting on either the goodness of the one or the faulty morality of the other; in fact, as will be discussed at a later point, they may portray a noble figure as one who has very doubtful origins without a single comment either. Thus the stories about the Holy Grail may have a sacred subject, but they are not at all sanctimonious in tone or content. On the contrary, they are stories told for entertainment value, not for moral uplift.

But the connexion between the Holy Grail in the stories that form the Grail cycle and the mythology of Welch paganism does not have to depend upon either the historical links mentioned above, or the literary relationship between the early Grail stories and the bardic tradition. There is a fair amount of internal evidence which may be added to the evidence already discussed. First of all there is the strange problem concerning what the Grail looks like, already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. From reading Chretien de Troyes it becomes quite clear that he did not conceive of the Holy Grail as a chalice. Instead it is described as the dish from which Christ ate the Pascal Lamb at the Last Supper. Thus the Holy Grail begins its career with a physical shape which is actually closer to the magical cauldron from the Island in the Western Sea

¹⁶(continued)

The Grail From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol, (Cardiff: The University of Wales, 1963), p. 3.

For questions about the possibility that the stories of Sir Gwain are not originally connected with the stories about Percival, see Jean Frappier, "Chretien de Troyes" in Loomis, Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, pp. 188ff.

than it is to the Mass chalice in the later Grail Stories.

Of course it would not be safe to build a case for a connexion between the Holy Grail and the Welch cauldron without more substantial evidence and the bulk of the evidence must come from the context in which the Grail is placed. But without turning to this evidence, it should be pointed out that although the Grail is not portrayed by Chretien as a magical dish to provide food at the banquet, but rather is said to contain only a Mass wafer, it may still be directly related to the magical cauldron in the Welch tales due to a misunderstanding of li cors. Roger Sherman Loomis has traced the development of the magical cauldron in Welch sources to the point where it became transformed into a platter bearing a horn of plenty.¹⁷ He goes on to suggest that Chretien, or the author upon whom he depended, misinterpreted li cors as body, since in Old France the nominative case for both "horn" and "body" was li cors -- thus transforming the horn and platter of Welch sources into the Grail and a consecrated host.¹⁸ Loomis goes so far as to suggest that this blunder created the setting for the whole of the Grail legend: a vessel from Britain, associated with both Arthur and our Lord, thus providing an opportunity for a long history of imaginative elaborations. There is much merit in this argument, and it would go a long way to explain the transformation from the Welch cauldron into the later Grail. But it does not seem wise to place as much emphasis on the argument as Loomis does: there are many other elements in the Grail stories that are directly related to the Welch

¹⁷Loomis, The Grail, pp. 59-60.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 61.

mythology, and they also have been given a more classically "Christian" treatment, at least on the surface, while remaining quite close to their originally pagan context.¹⁹

In some of the later tales, the relationship between the Holy Grail and the magical vessel in the early Welch stories about Arthur is more obvious. The prose Lancelot describes the Holy Grail (still a platter) acting in exactly the same manner that the kettle did in some of the Welch tales. Sir Gwain attends a splendid banquet in the Grail Castle which the Grail King attends, accompanied by a whole assembly of exceptionally fair knights. During the banquet they are served by a beautiful girl from the Holy Grail itself: "Forthwith were the tables replenished with the choicest meats in the world, and the hall filled with the sweetest odours."²⁰ This

¹⁹ An excellent example of the sort of pious game that was played with themes taken over from the Welch stories is the manner in which Lug's lance owned by Bran suddenly becomes the spear that wounded the side of Jesus owned by the Fisher King. The old, originally pagan element is given a new Christian meaning. And yet it is never wholly Christian: the strange destructiveness of Lug's spear is retained in the new context, and the wonderful Spear is associated with a sword said to be the agent which destroyed the whole realm of Logres--thus indicating that the Spear originally came from somewhere other than the Gospels.

Another example of the strange sort of thing that may be produced by the pagan genesis of the Grail stories is found in one of the continuations of Chretien in which the Grail is still spoken of as a platter--but this time one containing the head of a man bathed in blood: in fact the head of Peredur's cousin. The hero responds by going on a vengeance quest which is surely unrelated to any sacred theme concerning the Grail, but is straight out of the Welch tradition.

²⁰ See Jessie L. Weston, Sir Gwain at the Grail Castle (London: David Nutt, 1903), pp. 54-67, for the complete passage describing the banquet.

same theme is even repeated in Queste del Saint Graal which has been characterized as Cistercian Allegory. In this tale the Grail is a mystical object that appears and disappears in Arthur's castle before King Arthur himself and his knights. In spite of the fact that the work is really a sermon, and all of the details are spiritualized, the old cornucopia theme from the Grail's Welch ancestry remains:

Then there entered into the hall the Holy Grail, covered with white samite, but there was none might see it nor who bare it. And there was all the hall fulfilled with good odours, and every knight had such meats and drinks as he best loved in this world. And when the Holy Grail had been borne through the hall, then the holy vessel departed suddenly, that they wist not where it became.²¹

Wolfram von Eschenbach's Parzival also describes the Holy Grail functioning as a horn of plenty. Wolfram's description of the Grail is very similar to the description in Lancelot, except for some reason he has changed the Grail from a platter into some sort of stone that seems to resemble the Philosopher's Stone. At any rate, the Grail has lost none of its powers in his version of the story, and it provides the same magical banquet that is described in Lancelot and Queste del Saint Graal.

Thus the bulk of the stories about the Grail describe the Grail as a magical source of food and drink. The only important exception is the first Grail story of Chretien in which the Grail's food-giving function is limited to one man: the Fisher King, who lives on the

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See Malory, The Quest for the Holy Grail, Book XIII, Chapters 2-8, for the complete incident.

Mass wafer alone. Furthermore, the Grail is not usually described as a chalice; of the tales discussed, only the late version from Malory portrays the Grail as a chalice. Even when the Grail legend is put to pious use, it does not deviate far from its Welch prototype.

But, of course, the relationship between the Holy Grail and the legends about Arthur's trip to the Island in the Western Sea does not stop with the Grail itself; the context within which the Holy Grail is set shows a remarkable similarity to the details of the early Welch stories. One of the similarities has already been touched upon in this chapter: the Grail is treated as a magical vessel that dispenses food in the same miraculous manner that the cauldron of King Bran dispenses food for his great banquets. But it should also be pointed out that the banquets themselves, the castle in which they are held, and the people who attend the banquet are similar to the details of the Welch stories about Arthur. This is especially true in the case of the prose Lancelot, and Wolfram von Eschenbach's Parzival, but it is also true in Chretien de Troyes' Conte del Graal.

The relationship is less obvious in the case of the Queste del Saint Graal; basically only the magical properties of the Grail to dispense food remain; the other details are omitted, and the Grail is free to mysteriously appear and disappear without direct reference to either its Castle, guardian, or bearer. This is not a surprising development, since the Grail does become a Christian symbol, used for Christian purposes in the Queste. In fact the final appearance of the Holy Grail has been described as an allegory of the meaning of Transubstantiation with justification:

And then the bishop made semblant as though he would have gone to the sacring

of the mass. And then he took the obley which was made in the likeness of bread. And at the lifting up there came a figure in likeness of a child, and the visage was red and as bright as any fire, and smote itself into the bread so that they all saw it that the bread was formed of a fleshly man.²²

But even this story retains a number of earlier characteristics from the earlier tradition, and there is a Grail Castle and a mysteriously wounded keeper of the Grail even in this most Christian of the Grail stories.

One of the most persistent themes in connexion with the Grail is the strange castle in which it is housed, and the nature of the banquet at which it appears. In every one of the Grail stories, the castle is a magical place. As we have already pointed out, the Celtic other-world was a paradise in which the heroes feasted perpetually, and the Castle of the King of the other-world was characterized by a strange sort of timelessness. The company that assembled for the feasts at which the Grail made an appearance is remarkably similar to the company of heroes from the Welch tales. Even in the Queste del Saint Graal, King Pellas presides over an assembly of knights that is as splendid as any from the Welch sources, and one gets a mental image of the banquet that is not very far removed from that of the heroic assembly of King Bron's. The same thing is true in the prose Lancelot, with the addition of the fact that the author stresses the extreme fairness of the king's appearance and the nobility of the knights. But the closest similarity between the company of the King of the other-world, and the Grail company is found in Parzival, where

²²Ibid., Book XVII, Chapters 20-21.

Wolfram stresses the role of the Grail as an agent of eternal youth: all who live in its presence remain unchanged, and even a brief sight of the Grail is enough to prevent death from any cause for a week.

Another of the details surrounding the Holy Grail is the bearer of the Grail. In this detail all of the major stories in the Grail cycle concur: the Grail is borne by a marvelously fair maiden, and she is in some way associated with a loathy maid who rebukes the hero (usually Percival) when he fails to respond properly to the Grail test by remaining silent. In such writers as Chretien de Troyes the Loathy Maid is quite obviously separate from the bearer of the Grail, but in several of the Grail stories (Perlesvaus, and one of the continuations of Chretien) the author stresses the fact that the Loathy Maid is the same person as the beautiful Maid who bears the Grail at the banquet. It is quite probable that the reason for this strange tradition surrounding the Grail Bearer is to be found in Welch (and through them, Irish) mythology. We have already become accustomed to the manner in which pagan deities have played their parts in the development of characters in the Arthurian cycle, and it should come as no surprise that there seems to be a relationship between the cup-bearer of the Irish paradise and the bearer of the Grail.

Both the Grail Bearer and the Question Test seem to be related to Irish mythology. There is a folk story which records an experience, almost exactly parallel to the experience of Percival in Conte del Graal, in the career of King Conn in which Conn visits a mysterious castle which disappears when he fails to answer to answer to whom the cup should be given.²³ This visit

²³M. Dillon, Early Irish Literature (Chicago: University Press, 1948), pp. 107-109.

of Conn's is a visit to the Irish paradise, and the maid who asks the question is actually the Sovereign of Ireland, the ancient goddess who is the personification of Ireland, and who appears as both a beautiful maiden and an ugly crone--often with both phases occurring in the same story as they do in the later tales from the Grail cycle already mentioned. Such a dual personality is not unusual in ancient goddesses, especially moon goddesses, and it appears that Eriu, as the mother goddess of Ireland was no exception in having both a benign and a malignant aspect.²⁴ In fact we have already mentioned one connexion of the moon goddess with the Welch tales of the Island in the Western Sea; and therefore it is not at all surprising to see her reappear in a more obvious form in some of the stories derived from this tradition.²⁵

The identification of the Grail Bearer with the goddess of the Irish (especially the identification of the moon goddess in her dark phase as the goddess of death) is greatly aided by the figure of the Fisher King, which is derived from the same source. The Fisher King, or King Bron, or King Pellas, seems to be related to the Welch (actually Celtic) God of the Sea already discussed in relationship with King Bron of the Island in the Western Sea. Fertility played a great part in the stories about Bron and his Island paradise, and we have already discussed Bron as a fertility figure. All that remains to be discussed at this point is the relationship between the Fisher King - his castle, his company of knights, his banquets, and even the Holy Grail itself - and the similar themes in the stories about Arthur and the Island in the Western Sea.

²⁴See Footnote 9, p.66 in this paper.

²⁵Weston, Sir Gwain at the Grail Castle, pp. 60-61.

There is no doubt at all that fertility is an important part of the stories about the Fisher King: the Fisher King is wounded in a way that is very similar to the wound from which King Bron suffered (Bron is also wounded in his foot) and in several of the tales we are told that the countryside will remain barren until the wound is healed. Chretien de Troyes goes so far as to say:

Do you not know what will happen if the King does not hold his land and is not healed of his wound? Ladies will lose their husbands, lands will be laid waste, maidens, helpless, will remain orphans, and many knights will die.²⁶

This same theme is important in the other stories in the Grail cycle: the realm of the Fisher King is a wasteland until someone answers the question test and restores the health of the King. Thus the figure of the Fisher King may be explained by referring back to King Bron, and through him to Bran, the God of the Sea; while at the same time there is nothing in Christian tradition to give rise to such a figure.

The final problem that needs to be discussed is the relationship between Joseph of Arimethea and the Holy Grail. In the first continuation to Chretien de Troyes, Joseph is represented as the caretaker of the Grail for many years, in a way that suggests the eternal youth theme found in Wolfram von Eschenbach; and then as the founder of the line from which the Fisher King came. The other works about Joseph are later than the works that have been discussed in this chapter. Joseph of Arimethia is one of the few major figures mentioned in the Bible who was not firmly accounted for in the tra-

²⁶Weston, Sir Gwain at the Grail Castle, pp.60-61.

ditions of the Church; thus it was possible to say almost anything about him one wished, which is exactly what the monk of Glastonbury did, as has already been mentioned. The later stories about the Grail and Joseph of Arimethia integrate the Glastonbury legend about Joseph with the Grail tradition. Thus, the stories about Joseph are not central to the Grail tradition and he does not affect the central thesis of this chapter: which is that the legends of the Grail are largely based on Welch traditions, which are in turn derived from pagan sources and traditions; and the Christian element are a secondary overlay.

CHAPTER VI: THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING
(Arthurus: Rex quondam rexque futurus)

The legends concerning the return of Arthur have been collected by Roger Sherman Loomis, and the collection is quite impressive. They come from almost every country which was directly connected with the development of the Arthurian cycle. Thus there are of course tales from Wales and Cornwall as might be expected, but there are legends about places where Arthur and his knights wait to return from France and even Italy. Thus the legends surrounding the return of Arthur are definitely a major part of the folk traditions concerning Arthur.¹ But the interest in Arthur's return is not limited to the oral folk tradition; it plays at least some part in almost every written part of the Arthurian cycle as well, with the single exception of Queste del Saint Grail, which makes it quite clear that Arthur, like all of mortal flesh, died, with the bare minimum of unusual circumstances. This is not a surprising turn of events. Of all of the elements in the Arthurian cycle, Queste del Saint Graal is the most consistently Christian in its treatment of the Arthurian legend.

In most of the earlier stories in the Arthurian cycle, Arthur is taken away, after receiving his fatal wound, to a magical island to be treated by a water fay who possesses magical powers (Morgan, usually)², and

¹For a more complete listing of the various forms taken by the legends of Arthur's survival and return see Roger Sherman Loomis, "The Legend of Arthur's Survival," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1959), pp. 64-72.

²See Chapter 4, pp. 51-55.

the story is concluded in a somewhat ambivalent manner with the return of Arthur a very real possibility: Arthur does not in fact die, he is actually in the same position regarding the Arthurian legend that Enoch and Ezekiel are in the Old Testament. Queste del Saint Graal follows the basic pattern of the tradition actually begun in Chretien de Troyes, but makes just one change: Arthur is taken off by the mysterious ladies after he receives his mortal wound in the battle with Mordred (in fact the barge they depart upon is very magical--it moves by its own will), but instead of taking Arthur to Avalon, as in Chretien de Troyes and the other stories based on his work, the barge carries Arthur off to die in peace in a chapel on the shore of the lake where he is found three days later. Thus, with this exception, the literary treatment of Arthur agrees upon some form of Arthur's return, usually from a magical island which seems to come from the same tradition which produced the Island in the Western Sea discussed in the last chapter. The folk versions of the legend are numerous, as has been mentioned, and they usually follow an alternative legend that Arthur is under a mountain waiting to return.³ Actually the basic division is between two Celtic other-worlds: an island in the sea which is a paradise, the Isle of Apples (which became Avalon in Chretien de Troyes and the later romances), and the under-world, usually thought of as under a mountain, the abode of the dead. Thus the literary tradition makes a great point of the fact that Arthur did not die after receiving his wound; while the folk legends make no such statements at all, on the whole. It is difficult to say

³Loomis, "The Legends of Arthur's Survival," p. 69; also Chapter 2, pp. 21-24.

which tradition is the closest to the folk sources, but the return from the underworld seems to be, since it appears to be related to an ancient British religious tradition which stretches back beyond even the period of the Druids, back to the earliest strata of British religion represented by what can be reconstructed of the religious faith of the barrow-builders in late Stone-age Britain.⁴

Legendary figures who are expected to return from the under-world are not at all uncommon in folk literature; and there are even classical myths which fit roughly into the pattern of return from the other-world as well; probably the most famous example being the story of Orpheus and Euridice. Even within the context of late Medieval Europe, Arthur is not the only figure who is expected to return. There is a legend from Hungary that Jan Juss and his men are sleeping in a great cavern under Mount Tabor, ready to return in a moment of great national emergency to save the people of Bohemia--a legend remarkably similar to a later Welch story which will be discussed at a later point. During this same period the story of Arthur's return became associated with the Tor of Glastonbury, which apparently was connected in some way with the Celtic under-world.⁵ This development is not really surprising: Arthur was treated as a heroic figure even in the old Welch sources; therefore it would have been surprising if he had not taken upon himself a whole range of

⁴Ibid., p. 21.

⁵Ibid., p. 24; also J. Armitage Robinson, Two Glastonbury Legends (Cambridge, University Press, 1926), pp. 45ff.

of heroic legend which tends to be common to figures of his type the world over. We have already discussed the development of characters within the Arthurian cycle; and it should come as no surprise that the figure of Arthur himself has many attributes in common with a figure like Sir Gwain, who seems to be derived from the mythology of some form of an ancient solar-cult.⁶ Arthur appears to function as a solar hero in the early Welch tales about his adventures concerning the Island in the Western Sea, and even to a great extent in his role as the Wild Huntsman.⁷ Thus it becomes necessary to see if there might be some sort of pagan mythology in Britain which helps account for features found in the later versions of the Arthurian Cycle.

It is possible to find the theme of the return of the hero in native British mythology as early as written sources exist to record. A Roman officer by the name of Demetrius, stationed in Britian following the invasion of the Emperor Claudius, recorded that the natives of Britain believed that Cronus connects the British deity with a sun god: a sun god who played a very important role in an ancient British fertility religion. A further indication that this might be the case is found in the legendary figure of Owen Lawgoch who developed at appromixately the same time as did the stories of Arthur as the once and future king.⁹

⁶See Chapter 4, pp. 45-48..

⁷See Chapter 3, pp. 33-36.

⁸Sir John Rhys, Celtic Folklore, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1909), Vol. I., p. 493.

⁹Roger Sherman Loomis, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1927), p. 350.

Owen appears to have been an historical figure who was invested with the same mystique which applied to Arthur.

As we have already pointed out, Arthur was clearly not considered to be a king in the earliest strata of materials; even as late as Nennius he was a commoner who held a kingly position. It is quite probable that Arthur owes his kingship to the same sources which gave rise to the legends of his return. The role of a solar hero is remarkably similar to the role of a sacral king, and the phrase "rex quondam rexque futurus" seems to indicate a mutual interdependence of themes rather than a casual relationship. Thus Arthur appears to be related to the sacral kings which were common in the Near East and Africa, and probably were once found in Greater Greece as well.¹⁰

E. O. James relates the myth of the dying and rising god to the institution of kingship, and states that it is for this reason that the institution of kingship arose in the first place.¹¹ While each system

¹⁰Parrinder, African Traditional Religion, pp. 74-75; Roland Oliver, J. D. Fage, A Short History of Africa (Harmsworth: Penguin, 1962), pp. 45 ff.; Robert Graves, The Greek Myths, Vol. II, pp. 49, 50.

The story of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia from Homer's Illiad seems to be an example of a mitigated form of sacral kingship sacrifice--in this case the king's daughter is a replacement for the king--in spite of the fact that Homer obviously does not approve of the act, and uses it as the reason for Agamemnon's fate.

¹¹E.O. James contends that traces of the myth of the dying and rising god are to be found in all existing royal protocol, and that it is because of the mythological basis that the institution has been so remarkably stable. Christian Myth and Ritual (London, Murray, 1937) pp. 324-327.

has its own variations, the basic pattern tends to be rather stable, and it might be good to look at the institution in relationship to the mythology of the Arthurian cycle generally, and the legend of Arthur's return specifically. Essentially the basic concept of sacral kingship is an identification of the welfare of the people with the life of the king, and a connexion between the king and the pattern of a solar hero. In a very real sense the king is the people on the one hand, and represents deity to the people on the other. Thus the welfare of the people depends upon the welfare of the king, and if the king is impotent, fertility is denied to the people because of it.¹² This immediately brings to mind the figure of the Fisher King who fits the first half of the pattern perfectly, as we have already seen in the last chapter. Roger Sherman Loomis has suggested that in many ways Arthur at Avalon is similar to the figure of the Fisher King in the Grail stories, and that both figures are actually connected with Cronus in some way.¹³ And the pattern outlined above would seem to indicate that there is some basis

¹²This pattern is found in some African societies in which the king was either ritually killed or took their own life rather than continue living either physically weak or impotent. See. Geoffrey Parrinder, African Traditional Religion (London, SPCK, 1962) pp. 75ff.

The same basic pattern also appears in Hebrew sacral kingship, and the story of David and the young girl in Kings seems to have been intended to test David potency rather than to keep him warm: although probably nothing more than David's right to rule was at stake. See I Kings 1: 1-4.

¹³Loomis, Celtic Myth, pp. 12-16

for that statement. Thus perhaps both Arthur's return and the story of the Fisher King in the Grail stories arise from the same mythological basis and merely follow different forms of development.

The other part of the basic pattern of sacral kingship is the part which seems to be associated with Arthur and the legends of his return.

In many cultures there seems to have been some sort of identification between the king and the yearly cycle of the harvests followed by winter, spring, and the growing period. This is almost universally true among primitive agrarian peoples whose very lives depend upon the crops: the king was associated with the well-being of the crops and the cycle of the year. There is even some evidence to suggest that in some of the earlier societies the king was ritually killed during the mid-winter solstice to insure the return of the new spring and the success of the next year's crops:¹⁴ although in more advanced cultures this pattern tended to be mitigated quickly, with only a few symbolic ritual details being retained, such as the coronation festival which can be reconstructed from the Royal Psalms in the Old Testament, or the similar Babylonian ceremony in which the king was insulted and struck in the face.¹⁵

¹⁴Graves, The Greek Myths, Vol. I, p. 245, and Vol. II, pp. 62 and 49-50; Jane Harrison, Themis (Cambridge University: 1927), pp. 218-222.

¹⁵E. O. James, The Ancient Gods (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1960), pp. 124-126; A. R. Johnson Sacral Kingship (Cardiff, University of Wales, 1960), pp. 60ff.

Both James, from the history of religions side, and Johnson, from the more conservative school of biblical criticism, agree that the king of Israel functioned as a sacral king who mediated between the

On the surface of things the ancient Near East or Africa is still a long way removed from fifth and sixth century Britain and the career of Arthur; but only on the surface. Britain was, at one time, the centre for one of the more important religions of the ancient world: Druidism. In the pre-Christian era, and even down into the Christian era, Britain remained the training ground for the Druid priesthood. At one time Druid priests from Britain were found not only in Britain, but also in Gaul, and even as far away as the northern sections of Spain.¹⁶ In fact, the Druid cult was one of the main reasons for the Emperor Claudius' invasion of Britain, since the Druidical party in Gaul was mixing in local politics to such an extent that Claudius felt the need to restrict Druidism. This in turn meant that Claudius had to capture Britain, since any attack on Druidism, or any attempt to control, it, would have necessarily included the druidical college which was located somewhere in the midlands of England.¹⁷

It is, unfortunately, not possible to do a major reconstruction of Druidism in all details, but enough details remain to at least sketch the major characteristics in an outline form. Druidism, like most of the other pagan religions of its time, was an

¹⁵ (continued)
 people and Yahweh on the one hand, and represented the life of the people to Yahweh on the other. They both suggest that the Psalms, on the whole, are the remains of materials connected with the royal cult at Jerusalem. To a lesser degree, this theory is also shared by Sigmund Mowinckel, The Psalms in Israel's Worship (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962).

¹⁶ For a more detailed discussion of this problem, see Robert Graves, Claudius the God (Harmsworth: Penguin, 1956), pp. 219-221.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 221-223.

agrarian religion based upon the cycle of the year, and the attending cycle of fertility and barrenness: in short, the cycle of the sun-god. Its centres of worship, again in common with much of paganism, were largely sacred oak groves--especially close to the cult of another sun deity, Apollo. Closely associated with the sacred oaks was the mistletoe--a semi-parasitic epiphyte that is remarkable because it remains green throughout the winter, and was therefore thought to have magical values. The principle deity was, of course, a sun god; although the sun god shared all of his honors with the moon goddess and a host of minor deities that were very similar in many respects to the minor deities of the Graeco-Roman world, at least they were similar enough to permit the identification of orthodox pagan deities with the unorthodox deities of Druidism.¹⁸

The two principle festivals of Druidism were the midwinter solstice and midsummernight's eve: the zenith and nadir of the sun.¹⁹ Both points on the solar

¹⁸Rhys, Celtic Folklore, p. 493 ff.

¹⁹There is now some evidence beginning to be made available which will go far in questioning the primacy of the druidical cult in Celtic mythology. The evidence referred to is that provided by Dr. Gerald Hawkins of the Harvard-Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Dr. Hawkins has successfully proven that the Stonehenge (which is a thousand years earlier than any druidical cult) is both solar oriented, to exactly point out the midsummer sunrise by way of an opposite arch, and also lunar oriented by way of secondary arches. This would indicate solar-lunar worship of the type postulated by this paper, without the need for any connexion with the druidical cult.

However, at the present time, there has not been enough evaluation of the material to consider it in the main body of this text. Whatever conclusions are reached regarding the relationship between the Stonehenge and the Druids will not affect the basic argument

calendar were the occasions for major celebrations, although, of the two, the midwinter solstice was the more important. It was at this festival that the custom of offering human sacrifice to assure the fate of the new year was observed, even after attempts by the Emperor Claudius to stamp out such barbaric practices.²⁰ This much remains from the accounts of various contemporary witnesses. It is impossible, unfortunately, to say what role the king played in all these ceremonies, and whether or not the human sacrifices were substitutes for him in any way. But even without information of this type, it is safe to say that there is a fertility religion which is native to Britain without having to go to the extreme that Jessie Weston does in From Ritual to Romance.²¹ Even more importantly we know from the work done with the early Welch legends by such people as Sir John Rhys, that the myth of the dying and rising god is native to the ancient British legends. Therefore it seems quite within the range of probability that these early legends were combined in some way with the ritual of the Druids.²²

So far well and good, but the problem of con-

¹⁹ (continued)

of this paper; on the contrary, the new evidence simply pushes back the advent of the type of solar cult postulated by this paper to an even earlier date.

For a discussion of the issue, see The S.A.O. News, Vol. III, No. 11, November, 1963, published by the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

²⁰ Graves, Claudius the God, pp. 224, 225.

²¹ Jessie L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance (New York: Anchor, 1954).

²² Rhys, Celtic Folklore, pp. 493, 494.

necting all of this material with the probably historical figure of Arthur still remains. This problem is not as difficult as it might seem at first glance. The customs of the country people of England, Scotland, and Wales indicate that at least the basic outline of the ancient fertility religion persisted right into the modern period. The needfires in times of emergency, the Belintine fires on midsummernight's eve, and the yule fire at the midwinter solstice continued to be observed--much to the scandal of the British Church--through the seventeenth century in England, and in rural parts of Scotland and Wales as late as the first half of the nineteenth century.²³

The Belintine fire ceremony, as it survived, was rather simple: the people extinguished the fires in their own homes on the nights of the festivals and met at a central bonfire, usually held on a hill. There they danced around the fire, and after it had burned down to a low flame, the younger couples leapt over it to insure a fertile marriage. In the earlier period, there was usually some sort of manifestation of deity--often a horned god strikingly similar to the god of the witch covens--followed by the dancing and the lovers' leap over the fire, and quite frequently a trip to the bushes to insure the fertility of the crops by sympathetic magic.²⁴

The earlier yule-fire ceremony contained a ritual portrayal of the death and resurrection of the god who represented life and fertility. On the eve of the midwinter solstice when the sun was at its weakest

²³Graves, The White Goddess (New York: Vintage, 1959), p. 464.

²⁴Margaret Murray, The Witch-Cult in Western Europe (Oxford: University Press, 1963), pp. 19-27.

point in the year, the sun god was represented as dying and being reborn. There are two points that need to be underlined at this time. The first is that the sun god, although he was vanquished by natural forces such as winter and the power of darkness, was thought to die for the welfare of the people. As the spirit of life itself, he did battle against the powers of darkness in very much the same way that the Messiah (the sacral king of Israel) did battle against the powers of chaos.²⁵ As with the Israelite sacral king, the corn king was thought to die in his battle against the powers of darkness, while the king in the Royal cult was probably never considered to be dead at any point.²⁶ The second point is that the corn king was resurrected again in the ceremony so that his experience could reflect the nature of the seasons, and so that he could continue to serve the people. Certainly it is the pattern of nature that provides the outline for the ceremony of the sun god or corn king (both are actually the same person, in spite of the two different ways of describing him). Winter is always followed by Spring: life ebbs out, but it is never defeated for more than a brief while. Thus the king who represents life cannot remain dead either. The very same identification between the king and the collective life of the

²⁵Psalm 68.

²⁶In Israel it is more than likely that the king was not thought to die at the New Year Festival; instead he was thought to be in the bonds of Sheol--the next thing to actual death--that is, to be under the influence of darkness and death, and in danger of actual death. The high point of the festival was the fact that Yahweh did not allow Sheol to be victorious over the king. An excellent example of this mythology is to be found in that old favorite, Psalm 39.

people leads to the pattern of both the death and the resurrection of the king. He dies for the people in the manner of the sacral king--he is in fact the corn king--and he is resurrected to symbolize the collective life of the people in the same way.

It is interesting to speculate as to whether or not the ceremony of the needfires, and the similar Belintine and yule fires, are related directly to Druidism. There are so many parallels that there seems to be a connexion. For one thing, the Belintine and yule fires are associated with the two most important festivals of the Druid cult: the midwinter solstice, and mid-summernight's eve. Both are also basically concerned with the same cycle of fertility which is symbolized by these two festivals. And perhaps most importantly, the matter of the dying god seems to be related to the druidical practice of human sacrifice. The corn king of the Belintine and yule fires did not die, in fact; the ritual was clearly dramatic and not actual. But it is quite probable that the ceremonies were a mitigated form of the druidical festivals' human sacrifices--it is perhaps not coincidence that the human victims in druidical sacrifices were killed by being suspended in cages over bonfires.²⁷

We have already discussed the survival and development of the Arthurian stories among the Welch people; therefore it is not entirely conjecture to suggest that the gap between the historical prototype of Arthur (who inhabits a real world which can be reconstructed from the remaining historical fragments) and the figure of Arthur, Rex quondum rexque futurus, from the late romances (who inhabits a world of myths and archetypes),

²⁷Graves, Claudius the God, p. 224.

is bridged by the cultural setting of the Welch people. Thus Arthur is transformed from a Romanized war leader into a sacral king. It is important to note that even the bare bones of the Arthurian story which remain from the Welch materials all include stories of Arthur's death in his last mighty battle (in some cases a battle against internal revolt, but in most cases one fought against invaders). Thus quite literally Arthur died for the people: the last battle that Arthur fought brought at least fifty years of peace for Britain. So Arthur has at least the first half of the cycle in common with the dying and rising god or the corn king. Nor is that the end of the matter: the legend of the return of Arthur and elements of mythology similar to those in the need-fire or corn king ritual are not as far removed from the primary strata of the surviving materials as might be supposed at first glance.

Even in the earliest strata of the Welch stories which deal with Arthur, there are the seeds of the later tradition. The Black Book of Carmarthen contains several stories about the grave of Arthur. The grave is something of a wonder: it is not clear whether this is because of the legend of the return of Arthur, or simply because of the fact that its location is not known. Furthermore, there is a reference to another grave, belonging to one of Arthur's sons, which has the ability to change its size and shape; it is now impossible to say what might lie behind that legend.

Although the older Welch sources such as The Black Book of Carmarthen, which are closest to the original traditions, are ambiguous about the return of Arthur; it is possible to state flatly that by the time of the Norman invasion of England in 1066, the legends of Arthur's return had already become widespread. Arthur

of Britain had taken over at least some of the jobs of the corn king: the dying and rising god. Hermon of Laon records a legend that was common in Cornwall that Arthur had died, but was also expected to return again.²⁸ Furthermore Gaimar records a similar story from Wales.²⁹ Gaimar's version is interesting because it suggests that Arthur is expected to return in a period of great natural distress, and to act as an eschatological figure who will bring a Golden Age for Britain with him. Thus while the Arthurian stories are still part of the popular domain, either told by the people themselves or sung by the Welch bards, Arthur has already become the king of a past Golden Age and the king of a Golden Age to come in the future. The diverse strands of historical epic have been fused with the mythological materials from the Welch, and possibly, through them, the Druids and even earlier paganism (for example, the early forms of the legend are apparently related to the myths connected with the underworld, more than with the island paradise theme).

Thus it is quite difficult to discover any really close relationship between the mythology of Arthurus: Rex quondam rexque futurus and any specifically Christian influence, except perhaps the eschatological element in the Welch legend mentioned by Gaimar. The only figure in Christian literature that even comes close to the mythological Arthur is the figure of Christ himself, and Arthur is far from being a type of Christ. For a Christian to knowingly take attributes from Jesus and apply them to Arthur would have been almost unthinkable in the period, unless it was done by the bards. It

²⁸Roger Sherman Loomis, Wales and Arthur (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1956), pp. 280-284.

²⁹Ibid.

is just barely possible that the Welch bards may have consciously borrowed from the stories they had heard about Jesus. It seems fair to assume they would not have been above doing so. There are a number of reasons for assuming that at least some of the Welch bards were in fact crypto-pagan in the early period, and even remained so throughout the period under discussion, or perhaps longer.³⁰ Thus there is no reason to assume that they would hesitate to do what a good Christian could not do. Nevertheless, there seems to be no need to try to prove a connexion between Christian tradition and the development of the tradition of Arthur's return. A prototype for Arthur as Rex quondam rexque futurus already existed among the Welch: a prototype that continued in folklore long beyond the period of time in which the stories of Arthur took their form.

On the other hand, there does seem to be something to the possibility of a connexion between the eschatological emphasis of some of the stories of Arthur's return, and Christian tradition. By 1066, England was deeply steeped in Christian literature and teaching, and the eschatological element in Christian tradition was stressed rather heavily during the early so-called medieval period all over Europe. There is evidence to show that the Welch bards knew not only the more usual eschatological stories, such as The Book of the Revelation According to St. John the Divine, but also that they knew a number of apocryphal apocalypses.³¹ Thus it is not

³⁰ Graves, *The White Goddess*, pp. 147 ff.
It is interesting to note in this connexion that the Church was well aware of the problem. As late as 1402, Henry IV took repressive action against "wasters, rhymers, minstrels, and other vagabonds...."

³¹ Ibid., pp. 148-150, and 157.

impossible that a connexion might exist between the emphasis upon Arthur's return in a time of national need, and orthodox Christian tradition. The idea of return at a time of great national danger is not a direct part of the story of the corn king, although it is not contrary in any way to the ethos of that mythology--in fact, it could be argued quite strongly that such a development is a logical extension of the role of the corn king as one who acts for the welfare of the people.

CHAPTER VII

Conclusion--THE ARTHURIAN MYTH AND CHRISTIANITY

Having now traced the development of the Arthurian myth from its genesis in the dim period of the history of Britain when Rome-in-Britain fought for survival against the Anglo-Saxon invaders; through the Celtic miasma of the early tales that can fairly be called Welch, and the increasingly mythological treatment of Arthur at the hands of the Welch bards; it is now time to attempt to put some of the pieces together into a comprehensive statement about the relationship between the Arthurian legend and the specifically Christian culture of Western Europe, which chose the Arthurian myth as the basis for one of the greatest bodies of related literature in any period since the days of classical mythology.

The beginnings of the legend, in so far as they are historical, are neither Christian nor anti-Christian. In spite of the fact that Gildas, the Venerable Bede, and Nennius were all monks, the tone of their chronicles does not really suggest that they saw the fight between the native Britons and the Anglo-Saxons in terms of a holy war of Christians against infidels and pagans. Instead the tone of their treatment is that of a conflict between civilization and barbarians, and their allegiance is basically a nationalistic allegiance. It is true that Romanitas and Christianity were identified to a great extent; enough so that Bede, who was after all a Saxon himself, identified himself with Rome because he was a Christian. It is even true that Nennius represents Arthur as wearing the Virgin's image in his battle

against the Saxons at the Battle of Badon Hill; but such statements do not disprove the basic contention stated above since they are not treated as either central or of positive value. Nennius' statement is a casual observation; it is not given as a cause for Arthur's victory. And even Bede's identification is natural since Rome was always highly revered in the traditions of the British Church. Thus there seems to be no interplay between Christianity and the Arthurian tradition on the level of the primary strata of the legends.

This disjunction between Christian themes and the subject of the Arthurian stories is seen even more clearly in the early Welch sources. In those stories Arthur belongs to a world of warriors and primitive myth that we have compared--with sufficient cause--to the homeric world and its view of life. The themes of the Welch stories are heroic themes which can be traced back to folk figures, and with a little effort, through the folk legends to the old deities of the Welch people. Arthur's portrayal as a mighty warrior and hunter has very little if any relationship to Christianity, since the underlying world-view of the people who composed the tales had very little in common with the Christian ethos..

The career of Arthur among the saints is perhaps the best example from this middle period of how little the Arthurian legend really had to do with Christianity. With a very few modifications of the early Welch stories about Arthur, the writers of the saintly lives were able to provide themselves with a perfect symbol of the worldly culture which had to be curtailed and made to walk the more peaceful ways of God and the Mother Church. The fact that they were able to get away with their presentation of Arthur indicates that it had a great deal in

common with the prevailing understanding of Arthur as he appeared in the early tales. Thus in the lives of the Welch saints, which are slightly later than the first Welch stories about Arthur, the relationship between Arthur and Christianity was dialectical; and the monks who wrote the vitas made sure their heroes of the faith came out on top.

And so, by the time the Welch had finished their role in the development of the character of Arthur, he had gone from a last defender of Romanitas to the figure of the Wild Huntsman, or the hero who raided the underworld to steal the magic kettle of King Bran; and he had come to be at home with demi-gods and thinly disguised deities such as Cuchulin, rather than the historical context to which he had once belonged. Places with mysterious pasts came to be associated with Arthur and his many deeds, or with the figures who surrounded him. The Welch, after all, gave Arthur the company of the inheritor of the Druids, Merlin; and the embodiment of the bards' wisdom and magic, Taliesin. And their mythology provided the basis for figures who were yet to come, figures like Gwain, whose Celtic roots still are seen sharply outlined as late as Malory and Sir Gwain and the Green Knight, which was written after the development of what has come to be the English tongue. But still the relationship between Christianity and the Arthurian legend has yet to begin.

Finally the legend left Wales and England by way of wandering sinners and the people of Brittany who were culturally linked to Britain. This is not to mention the political relationship between the Duchy of Aquitaine, the County of Anjou, and the Plantagenet Kings of England. Once in France the Arthurian legend

became associated with the tales of courtly love and ideals of chivalry (an association which had certainly not existed at home in Britain): and another change took place in the imagery and concerns of the Arthurian cycle which still did nothing to bring it any closer to Christianity. Courtly love and the Church never did mix; neither did chivalry and the Church, except to the detriment of the Church. Thus the new context was still as far removed as its older, more obviously pagan British predecessor.

And then Chretien de Troyes wrote Le Conte du Graal; surely the gap was finally closed. So it seemed, and yet...Under the surface there was something about the Grail which didn't quite fit, even if it did have a number of obviously Christian elements connected with it. The Grail behaved in a slightly strange manner for so holy an object, and it attracted into its orbit a number of figures who would have been right at home in a pagan cult of some sort, but who seemed to be strange companions of the Grail. Gwain, even without the usual sort of moral scruples, and the slightly more Christian Percival both attempted the Grail quest. But the Grail quest itself was a strange thing that again would seem to have very little to do with the Gospel, and a great deal to do with pagan Fertility cults and magical spells and riddles and other games.

The Grail castle and its Lord, the Fisher King, the Grail Bearer, and the context of the Question Text actually appear to take up in the opposite direction from Christianity. And although Jessie Weston got carried away when she suggested the Grail might be connected with a mystery religion brought to England by some Near Eastern sailors, her suggestion is no more

bizarre inherently than to suggest that the Grail and all of its strange people are the result of working with the Gospels and the cup Our Lord used at the Last Supper to produce a Christian tale. And of course if there were any remaining doubts, the continuations to the Grail story by Chretien de Troyes would have been enough to prove the discontinuity beyond a shadow of a doubt: a vengeance quest makes good sense from a folk-story point of view, but is certainly out of line when it comes to the Gospel.

Following Chretien de Troyes, there were a number of stories dealing with the Grail, from France through Germany. In the later stories some of the hints about the Grail's mysterious past are seen more clearly, and the Grail turns out to be true to its probable descent from Bran's cauldron. Furthermore the figures associated with the Grail continue to play a part in the story, and the Holy Grail is not really much closer to the teachings of the Church than were the earlier Welsh stories of Arthur--but before long a number of changes begin to appear, right along with the older details. The Grail gradually comes to be associated with the developing theology of the Church, and the Grail Quest begins to become more specifically Christian in nature. Quests del Saint Graal concludes the Grail Quest with a vision of the meaning of the Church's new doctrine about the presence of God in the Eucharist; and the Holy Grail has finally become a Christian symbol.

Of course there are still a number of difficulties involved in asserting the point too strongly. The figures around the Grail continue to betray the mythological origins from time to time, and a non-Christian air of magic tends to pervade the Grail. Even the Holy

Grail itself cannot shake off all of its old associations at once. It still acts in a manner that betrays its origins to anyone who takes time to look carefully at it. The Holy Grail continues to function as did the magical cauldron in spite of the fact that the author is careful to spiritualize the incidents of this nature in such a way as to obscure the older meaning that lies behind the Christian overlay. In fact, that is a very good term to describe what happened to the Holy Grail: The original pagan basis gradually became overlayed with Christian meaning.

But even the best overlay, as in Queste del Saint Graal, has a number of cracks. The Grail Castle, and the mysterious king with the wound, still remain: the Wasteland theme continues to occur: and even the hero who finally achieves the Grail is not the usual type of saintly hero, in spite of the fact that he is idealized to a high degree. Galahad is still the result of a union of the type that was forbidden by the Church—the one who achieves the Holy Grail is born as the result of fornication which at least one of the participants (Lancelot) thought was adultery with Arthur's queen. This is an untidy detail if the primary meaning of the story was to serve as an illustration for a doctrine of the Church. The Grail does become a Christian symbol beyond doubt; but its pagan roots are never deeply buried.

Of course the Arthurian cycle contained more than the Grail alone, and a whole cycle of other stories developed. Some of the figures in the later secular parts of the Arthurian Cycle have a familiar look about them, and it does not take a great deal of examination before it becomes clear that they are familiar because

of their genesis in folk mythology. Guenivere, with her unhappy experience being kidnapped, and her rescue by Gwain, serves as a clue that here again there is a connection with a more distant past. Themes like that contained in the story of Lancelot and Guinevere might possibly be used as an illustration of wickedness, but beyond that their Christian value seems to be somewhat doubtful. Morgan is even more obvious about her origins than is Guenivere; and thus it is fair to conclude that mythology is a major factor in the development of the later figures: but not a Christian mythology necessarily.

Finally there is the series of stories about Arthur's return from the Island in the Western Sea, or Avalon, or whatever it may be called. The idea of the return of the dead king is not dependent upon Christian symbolism or understanding. Rather it has much more in common with stories of dying and rising gods and with solar heroes than it does with the Gospel. It seems to be true that the Christian ethos may have modified the development of the stories in some of the details (Arthur becomes an apocalyptical figure probably through Christian inspiration) but the pattern is too close to a mockery of Christian mythology to be responsible for the development of the major theme itself. Thus Queste del Saint Graal does well to stress the idea that Arthur did in fact die as all mortals do. Even when the Arthurian cycle is most closely related to the concepts of the Christian faith, there is still something of its past retained. The Grail goes from Pagan roots to Christian symbol all right, but the "Christian" must always be qualified rather than unconditional. The same general pattern is true for the

history of the cycle as a whole. The legends become Christianized in the later romances--but never completely; even when they are most "Christian", they are less than half a step away from their pagan basis.

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